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The alternation between l'on *and* on *in spoken French*[1]

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ABSTRACT

Although frequent reference is made to *l'on* as an alternative to *on* in standard grammars, judgements vary as to whether or not *l'on* is used at all in spoken French. This question is investigated here by treating *l'on* ~ *on* as a sociolinguistic variable. A review of the historical, dialectal and cross-linguistic background is followed by an examination of the traditional 'rules' for the use of *l'on*, as described by Vaugelas and reconsidered by Goosse for written French. The frequency of *l'on* in speech, and the contexts in which it is used, are then examined in a corpus of informal interviews, and some comparisons are made with a corpus of TV news reports. (The total N of *on* + *l'on* in the two corpora is 3,549.) In general, *l'on* can be viewed as a 'long form', marking formality and comparable in some respect to *l'un(e)*, *cela*, *ce sont* and *nous -ons*. But there are some individuals who use *l'on* even when speaking informally, especially in relative clauses opening with *que*.

1 INTRODUCTION

A good deal has been written in recent decades on the French subject pronoun *on*, especially concerning the pragmatics and semantics of its use (Atlani, 1984; Boutet, 1986, 1988, 1994; Le Bel, 1991; Leeman, 1991; Leeman-Bouix, 1994; Stewart, 1995). There has also been a smaller number of sociolinguistic studies on aspects of variation between *on* and other subject pronouns (Laberge, 1977, 1980; Laberge and Sankoff, 1979; Ashby, 1992; Coveney, 2000). Most of these writers, however, say little if anything about the use of *l'on* as a formal alternative to *on*.[2] On the other hand, few grammarians neglect to mention *l'on* at least in passing, but there are divergences in the comments they make with regard to its use and frequency. Among francophone grammarians, Wagner et Pinchon are perhaps the

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[2] As the final version of this article was being prepared, I came across a quantitative study of the *l'on* ~ *on* variable, conducted in the framework of information processing (Akama, Shimuzu and Shimuzu, 2002). Using data from *Le Monde*, the authors conclude that Vaugelas' rules continue to exert a strong influence on contemporary journalists writing in that newspaper.

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most categorical in that they claim that, while *l'on* is used in written language, in speech only *on* is heard (1962: 202). Sandfeld similarly stated that *l'on* was found only in literary language, whereas ordinary or everyday (*courante*) language used only *on* (1926/1965: 330). In the *Grand Larousse*, Bonnard advises the reader that *on* is sometimes replaced by *l'on* in literary language, but no mention is made of speech or other written language (1975: 2632). Chevalier *et al.* claim that the use of *l'on* provides an easy way to make one's language more elegant or stylish, but they omit to say whether or not it is restricted to the written mode (1964: 229). Mauger is one of the rare grammarians to specify that *l'on* can sometimes be found in spoken French (1968: 153). Reference grammars written for anglophone learners also tend to emphasise that *l'on* belongs to written French (Hawkins and Towell, 2001: 46), or even more narrowly to literary language (Price, 1993: 208). Nott agrees that *l'on* is essentially restricted to literary language, but he makes the additional claim that its use is limited to the impersonal (i.e. indefinite) function of *on*, equivalent to English *one* (1998: 78). This is certainly a point that merits corpus-based investigation. Lang and Perez state simply that *l'on* may occur instead of *on*, 'probably to improve the sound' (1996: 57), but it is unclear whether this is meant to imply that *l'on* is sometimes used in speech, and there is no indication of the registers in which *l'on* is appropriate. Almost all grammars specify at least some of the linguistic contexts in which *l'on* is either used or avoided, but we shall reserve discussion of this for later.

Goosse (1959) offers a near-exhaustive survey of the use of *l'on* in written French, concentrating on the post-classical, modern period, as well as reviewing the observations of grammarians from the 17th century onwards. But he gives just the briefest of mentions to spoken French, suggesting that this is an area for future research. Over thirty years later, it would appear that there has still been no large-scale, corpus-based study of the alternation between *l'on* and *on* in the spoken language. Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* nevertheless offer some valuable observations, of a qualitative nature, based on their extensive and varied corpus of spoken French (1990: 213). They describe *que l'on* as an example of *la langue du dimanche*, which could be glossed in sociolinguistic terms as 'very careful style'. They add that, in their corpus, it is used in narratives of a literary type and in the language of jurists. A group of children who were recorded acting out spontaneous sketches in which the characters were upper-class ladies (*'des dames snobs'*) made regular use of *l'on*, suggesting that it is something of a stereotype.

The present article aims to provide a quantitative study of *l'on* in alternation with *on*, and draws its data principally from a corpus of informal spoken French (the 'Picardy corpus'), but also secondarily from a corpus of French television news programmes, which is globally more formal in nature. The questions to be explored are as follows:

i. To what extent is *l'on* used at all in these two varieties of spoken French?
ii. Does *l'on* express the same range of referents as *on*? Indeed, are *on* and *l'on* truly equivalent in semantic and pragmatic terms? In particular, can *l'on* function as an equivalent of *nous* in the same way that *on* commonly does?

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iii. In which linguistic contexts is *l'on* used, and are these in conformity with the rules of usage laid down in reference grammars that are based for the most part on the written language?

To explore these issues, this study adopts a broadly variationist approach, treating *l'on* and *on* as variants of a sociolinguistic variable for the purposes of quantification. (A number of other aspects of variation in the use of personal subject pronouns in the Picardy corpus have been examined in Coveney, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).

2 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is well known that *(l')on* derives from Latin *homo*, the nominative singular form, whereas *homme* derives from *hominem*, the accusative (Pope, 1932: 176). The nominative origins of *on* are widely assumed to explain the fact that it has only ever been able to function as a subject, while its derivation from a noun is believed to account for the quite frequent presence of a preceding *l'* (Ewert, 1933: 130, 173). More recently, Boutet similarly has seen the optional use of *l'* with *on* as a trace of the latter's nominal origins, and as one piece of evidence that shows that *on* has still not fully completed the process of grammaticalisation from noun to pronoun. She points out that this is a property shared by certain other indefinite pronouns that originated as nouns: *d'aucuns*, *l'un*, *l'autre* (1988: 59). According to some, the form with the article was initially used only when designating human beings in general (e.g. Sandfeld, 1928/1965: 330). The form *om* is found as early as the Strasbourg Oaths (842):

(1) *si cum om per dreit son fradra salvar dift* 'as one should rightly help one's brother' (translation by Ayres-Bennett, 1996: 18).

Other very early attestations appear in the *Passion de Clermont* and the *Vie de Saint Léger*, both from the 10th century (Moignet, 1965: 100), but Moignet considered that the word in these texts had not yet clearly become a pronoun, and that its meaning was still restricted to 'mankind, in general'. Only from the *Vie de Saint Alexis* (c. 1040) do the forms of *on* take on a more general indefinite value, equivalent to 'people' or 'they':

(2) Sainz Boneface que *l'um* martir apelet. (*La Vie de Saint Alexis*, siglo XI, v. 566)

Some sources give *l'hom* here instead of *l'um*, but in general, it was *on* and *l'en* that were the most common variants in the Old French period. Buridant specifies that *an* and *en* were also quite widespread in Old French and he refers to them as 'delabialised' (unrounded) forms of *on* (2000: 409). According to Pope, *on* derives from unstressed *homo*, whereas *uem* comes from the stressed form of the same word (1932: 331). By the 14th century, *l'en* was still frequent and it was only in the Middle French period that *l'on* itself gradually began to spread. Subsequently *l'on* of course established itself in writing and formal speech, at least, but, in the 17th century, the advocate and academician Olivier Patru observed that *l'on* was entirely absent from 'popular' Parisian speech (Goosse, 1959: 298). Moving forward to the

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20th century, we find sometimes contradictory comments on *l'on* vs *on* in the spoken language. In his 1927 description of spoken French, Martinon claims that *l'on* is used far less than in the past, and that the main context in which it is still heard is following *si*: we shall see later that our spoken data from the late 20th century suggests that the first statement was correct but that the second was probably not (1927: 259). In contrast with Martinon, Bauche's account of the 'popular' French of the same period suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that *l'on* is in fact used more frequently in this variety than in standard spoken French, especially when speakers wish to sound distinguished (1920: 107). In one sense, this should not surprise us, since it is of course true that speakers of *français populaire* (i.e. the working class) are by no means monostylistic and are perfectly capable of speaking in a formal style. Damourette et Pichon (1911–40: 295) give two authentic examples of *l'on* produced by working-class speakers:

(3) Elle [= la chatte] comprend ce que *l'on* dit.
(4) Quand ils voyent que *l'on* se remue un peu . . .

Commenting on these examples, Goosse speculates that *que l'on* is perhaps the context in which *l'on* is used the most in the spoken language (1959: 298), and we shall find confirmation of this in our corpora.

What of the dialects? In the *Atlas linguistique de la France* (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1903–10), there are four maps showing dialect equivalents of indefinite *on*:

(5) QUAND ON A soif, ON A le gosier sec. (map 90)
(6) ON DIT que c'est bon de suer. (map 407)
(7) ON GLISSE sur le sentier. (map 651)
(8) Par ce temps, ON NE PEUT PAS dormir. (map 1083)

These maps show that, in parts of the south-west and especially the south-east, the equivalent of *on* begins with [l]. This is not, however, the case in the north, and, for our purposes it is relevant to note that, in the Somme, the equivalent of *on* is shown most often as [o], with the liaison form being, not [on], but [oz] (suggesting perhaps that this is an elided version of the 1st or 2nd person plural form).

With regard to North American varieties of French, and *québécois* in particular, there is little if any trace of *l'on*. The form is not mentioned at all by Laberge in her thesis on variation in personal subject clitics in Montreal French (1977), despite the several chapters she devotes to the diverse functions of *on* in variation with *nous*, *tu/vous* and *ils*. There is general agreement that *l'on* is much less frequent in speech in Quebec than it is in France (Hélène Blondeau, personal communication). This is very much in line with what has been found for other markers of formal speech, including aspects of pronominal variation. For example, the subject clitic *nous* is even rarer in informal speech in Quebec than it is in France (Laberge, 1977; Coveney, 2000).

Elsewhere in Romance, the equivalent of *(l') on* is found only in some dialects of Occitan and Francoprovençal, as shown in the *ALF*. The existence of a parallel form in most Germanic languages (e.g. German *man* from *Mann*, Danish *man* from *Mand*) has traditionally led to the conclusion that the French and Occitan forms

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are attributable to Frankish influence. The grammaticalisation of a lexical item meaning '(hu)man' to an indefinite pronoun is listed in the recently published *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* (Heine and Kuteva, 2002: 208–209), with examples from Icelandic, German and French, but it is not stated how widespread this is in other languages of the world. A different process that is indeed attested outside the Germanic/Frankish area, is the grammaticalisation of the numeral 'one' to an indefinite pronoun. This is found in the Abkhaz language of Georgia, as well as in several Romance varieties (Heine and Kuteva, 2002: 221). In Italian and Spanish, for example, *uno* is used in this way (*una* too in Spanish), but, unlike French *(l')on*, the form is not restricted to subject position, and it is said that the meaning is perhaps closer to 'someone' or 'some people', rather than 'one':

Italian

(9) Uno potrebbe scandalizzarsi sentendo queste parole. 'One/some people might be shocked to hear these words.' (Maiden and Robustelli, 1999: 128)

(10) Qui *uno* mangia bene. 'Here one eats well.'

(11) Cerco *uno* di Milano. 'I am looking for someone from Milan.' (both from Lepschy and Lepschy, 1988: 130)

Spanish

(12) Como los pájaros que comen las migas que *uno* les tira. 'Like birds eating the crumbs one throws to them.'

(13) Bueno, si no le dicen a *una* como hay que hacerlo . . . 'Well, if they don't tell one how to do it . . . ' (both from Butt and Benjamin, 1994: 373)

It is of course quite conceivable that early forms of Gallo-Romance possessed a similar indefinite pronoun derived from the numeral 'one', and this may have served to reinforce the use of *(l')on*, but there is no doubt that the latter is fundamentally different, both etymologically and syntactically, from Italian and Spanish *uno*. The English numeral *one* is derived from the Old English adjective *an*, meaning 'a certain', and came to be used in the 15th century as an indefinite pronoun. Since it has always been favoured by the upper classes and more educated individuals, it has been suggested that its spread in English was encouraged by the analogous case of *(l')on* in French (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990: 193–5; Wales, 1996: 80).

3 VAUGELAS, GOOSSE AND THE CONTEXTS FOR *L'ON* ~ *ON* USE

Before Goosse's landmark article of 1959, one of the most detailed studies of the choice between *l'on* and *on* was Vaugelas' five-page account in his *Remarques sur la langue française* (1647). Even in the Preface to his book, Vaugelas draws attention to the use of *l'on*, advocating the use of *si l'on* and *et l'on* as a marker of good style, though on page 14 he adds that both *qu'on* and *que l'on* are *'bons'*, according to the context. It is apparent from this that, even in the mid-seventeenth century, *l'on* had considerable socio-stylistic significance, in some respects perhaps not unlike the use of *one* in present-day English (cf. Wales, 1996: 81–84). Vaugelas discusses in some

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detail the contexts which favour either *on* or *l'on*. In most cases, he stresses that it is a matter of preference, rather than a categorical rule, and he often provides an attempt at an explanation for the preference or rule, normally invoking the notion of cacophony, and in particular the avoidance of hiatus. We can conveniently summarise Vaugelas' recommendations in tabular form, using modern conventions to represent the context (Table 1). Although reasons for the preference one way or the other are not given in all contexts, it was clearly Vaugelas' view that the major factor governing the choice of *l'on* or *on* was the avoidance of cacophony (later grammarians preferred to speak in positive terms of 'euphony'). The two causes of cacophony to Vaugelas' ear were hiatus (e.g. rule 7, after any vowel; rules 1, 3, 4, 5, after *si*, *et*, *ou* and *où*), and the repetition of the same CV syllable (e.g. rule 2, against *qu'on con-*; rules 14 and 15, against *-que que* and *que . . . que . . .*), or even of the same consonant in successive syllables (e.g. rule 8, against *l'on laisse*). However, this principle seems to be contradicted by rule 16, in which Vaugelas prescribes ('il faut toujours', he writes) the consistent use of one or other of *l'on* vs *on* within the same sentence. A less obvious principle, lying behind rules 12 and 9, is that where other means were available to prevent a hiatus, these were preferable to having recourse to *l'on*: optional liaison in the case of rule 12 (whereby *dont on* is preferred to *dont l'on*) and the so-called euphonic *t* after a verb ending in a vowel (rule 9). Vaugelas is quite categorical in the case of the latter, saying that only Bretons and other provincials would ever say *prie l'on*. (Inverted *l'on* had still been used by some writers in the 16th century, e.g. du Bellay and Montaigne, cited by Goosse, 1959: 269–270.) In this case, history has most certainly proved that Vaugelas' judgement was correct, since *verb + l'on* has clearly been ungrammatical from the Classical period. Rule 10 seems motivated by a feeling that *l'on* should not be used unnecessarily, and this appears to be widely observed today in written French: for example, editors (some of them, at least) correct paragraph-initial *l'on* to *on*, but otherwise tolerate sentence-initial *l'on*. Finally, behind rule 11 (against *l'on* after a consonant), one can discern another principle, that of avoiding unnecessary clusters of two or more consonants.

Goosse (1959) surveys the comments of a wide range of grammarians, in addition to providing a vast array of examples from literature, mostly prose from the post-classical period. He shows that, whilst Vaugelas' rules on the use of *l'on* were reiterated (often in more categorical and prescriptive terms) by other grammarians who came after him, there is little evidence that writers actually followed most of these rules systematically. Influential grammars and dictionaries continued to invoke the notion of euphony as a factor motivating the use of *l'on* (e.g. the Academy, Littré), and more specifically the avoidance of hiatus. Many grammarians since Vaugelas have provided basically the same list of words ending in a vowel after which *l'on* is used: *et*, *lorsque*, *ou*, *où*, *que*, *si*. Goosse gives a large number of examples from a range of authors to confirm this usage, but he adds that it is also true for *qui* and *quoi* (and *pourquoi*), and, less systematically, after *déjà*, *ainsi*, *aussi* and some other words (1959: 274–279). He notes that it is in a sense surprising to find *l'on* after *mais*, *puis* and *quand*, since in (formal) speech there would anyway be

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Table 1. *Vaugelas' rules for the choice between* on *and* l'on

Context	Example	Exception and/or reason
***L'on* is preferred:**		
1. *si*___	si l'on a laissé	ex. *si*___ [l]; hiatus
2. *que*___ *con-/com-*	que l'on commence/conduise	cacophony (*qu'on con/m*)
3. [e]__ (incl. *et*)	en cette extrémité l'on ne saurait	ex. at start of sentence, *on* is acceptable
4. *ou*___	ou l'on rit, ou l'on pleure	
5. *où*___	un lieu où l'on vit à bon marché	
6. *-ol* pronounced [u]___	c'est un fol [= fou], l'on se moque de lui	
7. V___ (i.e. any vowel)		ex. *'e-féminin'* (i.e. word-final schwa), and after a verb
***On* is preferred:**		
8.___ [l]	si on le veut; qu'on laisse	cacophony (*l'on l + V*)
9. verb____	prie-t-on, alla-t-on	(only provincials say *prie-l'on*)
10. ____ or ##____ (i.e. at start of sentence of speaking turn)	On dit (but *l'on* is also acceptable)	
11. C__		
12. *dont*__	dont on ne cesse de parler	
13. 'feminine e'___		
14. *que . . . que . . . que*___	il n'est que trop vrai que depuis le temps qu'on a commencé . . .	cacophony
15. *-que que*___	on remarque qu'on ne fait jamais	cacophony
The same form is preferred:		
16. within same sentence	on loue, on blâme, on menace; l'on dit et l'on fait	

a liaison to prevent the hiatus. He concludes that in such cases, given the absence of any possible euphonic value for *l'on*, it must be considered 'un simple substitut' of *on* – by which he appears to mean something similar to a free variant – and it is used alongside forms such as *nul* and the imperfect subjunctive, as a way of making one's writing more elegant (1959: 296–297). One might add, however, that, in the written language, there *is* a significant difference between *on* and *l'on*, in that the latter has more substance than the former. Goosse is at pains to point out that writers vary between *l'on* and *on* even in the contexts that favour *l'on*: 'Certains auteurs utilisent donc derrière une voyelle tantôt *on* et tantôt *l'on*; parfois même dans une seule phrase [. . .]' (p. 270). From the viewpoint of variationist sociolinguistics, such inherent variation is a familiar phenomenon (cf. Labov, 1972), and we shall see later whether there is evidence for this in the corpora of spoken French. Despite the rules enunciated by Vaugelas, and reiterated by most grammarians since, Goosse gives literary examples of *l'on* following a phonetic consonant: *comme l'on* is especially frequent, but all consonants seem to be involved, even [l] itself. Contrary to what has sometimes been said (by, for example, Thomas, 1971), Goosse suggests that sentence-initial *l'on* has by no means disappeared: he reports that it is found quite often in modern authors such as Constant, Stendhal, Gide and Romains.

Goosse highlights two of Vaugelas' rules that have been treated as near-obligatory (or 'near-categorical', in variationist terms) by writers in the post-Classical period:

> Rule 2 (in Table 1): Use *l'on* between *que* and *con-/com-*.
> Rule 8: Use *on* before word-initial *l* (1959: 271).

It is true that occasional counter-examples to these two rules can be found, even in the writing of well-known authors. In *Le bon usage*, Goosse reports that those who ignore rules 2 and 8 include distinguished writers such as Barrès, Jammes, Valéry, Mauriac and Camus (1986: 1142). Lightly edited sources such as sites on the World-Wide Web provide further evidence that these rules are sometimes disregarded. A recent search (on 4.6.04, of French-language web pages based in France) using the Internet search engine Google, produced 1,740 occurrences of the string *l'on l* – a relatively small number when compared to the 1.27 million 'hits' for *on l'* that were produced on the same occasion.

On the whole therefore, these two rules are very widely adhered to. Why should this be the case in these two contexts? It is popularly said that *que l'on* is sometimes used to avoid saying *qu'on*, due to homophony with the semi-taboo *con*. It is not impossible that this is a factor for at least some speakers, but we may note that this actually goes beyond the avoidance of *qu'on con-/com-*. Moreover there is no doubt that sequences such as *qu'on comprend* or *qu'on considère* are quite unexceptional in everyday French. With regard to rule 8, it is no doubt true that writers and even speakers often try to avoid superfluous alliterations, and that when these do occur, they can be perceived as clumsy or even ridiculous. However, a sequence of just two words beginning with the same sound is not at all unusual and generally provokes little reaction: page 285 of Goosse (1959) yields the following five examples: *sur cent*; *nuances numériques*; *souvent sans*; *parlerai plus*; *presque personne*. When asked explicitly

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why they tend to avoid *l'on l + V*, native speakers typically say it is 'for aesthetic reasons', and yet it is hard to see objectively why such a sequence should seem less pleasant than a similar string involving another consonant. Perhaps the real reason lies simply in what they were taught at school.

Despite the abundance of his examples, Goosse (1959) provides few statistics. An exception is when he notes that the grammatical category of each instance of *que* has a major effect on whether *l'on* or *on* is selected. Taking his data from Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, Loti, Barrès, Gide and Duhamel, Goosse found that *l'on* was used in 30/100 cases where *que* is a conjunction, but in 48/100 instances where *que* was a relative pronoun. (He adds that the proportions are more or less the same for each individual author – though of course the total numbers involved there are quite small.) His conclusion is naturally that *l'on* is used more frequently with relative *que*. We shall see shortly whether the same is true for our spoken data.

4 THE PICARDY CORPUS AND THE TV NEWS CORPUS

Before considering the use of *l'on* vs *on* in the contemporary spoken language, a brief description of the nature of the two corpora is in order. The Picardy corpus consists of thirty informal sociolinguistic interviews with a group of adults from the Somme *département*, who were working at the time in various children's *colonies de vacances*. The demographic composition of the sample reflects the typical workforce in most such holiday centres. There are roughly equal numbers of females and males, but just three informants aged 50 or above (all female). The twenty-seven others have been divided into two age groups, 17–22 and 24–37, which were determined on the basis of two socio-economic criteria that are widely acknowledged as affecting one's linguistic behaviour: in contrast with the 24–37 age group, all members of the younger group were unmarried and had yet to enter the job market on a permanent basis. Informants were deemed, on the basis of occupation, to belong to one of three broad social classes, higher, intermediate or working (cf. Marceau, 1977). As is typical in *colonies de vacances*, most of the informants in the intermediate and higher classes worked in education (or their parents did), and it was thanks to their longer summer holidays that they were able to spend three or so weeks working in this setting. In contrast, there are just five informants of working-class origin (students or young unemployed), since few older working-class people work in *colonies de vacances*. The number of informants in each sub-category is shown in Table 2.

Interviews generally tend to produce language that is more formal than informants' everyday speech, but in this corpus informality was encouraged by both the setting and the fact that the fieldworker stayed in each camp for a few days, thus becoming a temporary member of the community. In twenty-four of the interviews, the informant and interviewer used reciprocal *tu* as the pronoun of address, and the main topic of conversation (the informant's experience of working in *colonies de vacances*) was one which also encouraged informality.

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Table 2. *The demographic composition of the sample of speakers for the Picardy corpus*

		Working class	Intermediate class	Higher class	Unknown class
Younger (17–22)	F	2	2	2	
	M	2	3	1	2
Mid-age (24–37)	F	1	2	2	
	M	–	3	4	1
Older (50–60)	F	–	3	–	

Although modest in size when compared with some corpora of Canadian French assembled by teams of researchers, the Picardy corpus is one of very few corpora of metropolitan French to have been transcribed in its entirety and subsequently computerised. This latter fact makes it particularly valuable for studies of grammatical variability, which require the scrutiny of large quantities of examples. Despite the fact that the corpus consists of interviews (rather than spontaneous interaction), and interviews conducted by a non-native-speaker at that, it does represent a fairly informal variety of spoken French, relatively close to the interviewees' most casual style (their 'vernacular', cf. Labov, 1972). This is reflected in the fact that the overall rate of omission of the negative particle *ne* is 82% – much higher than in some other corpora of adults' French, though lower than in most samples of children's speech, where the omission rate is often nearly 100%. For the present study, concordances of *on* were produced for all thirty speakers, using the Oxford Concordance Program. These concordances extracted all tokens of *l'on* also, since the apostrophe was specified in the command file as punctuation. (cf. Coveney, 1996, for further details of the fieldwork, the transcription and the concordancing.)

To complement the informal speech of the Picardy corpus, a second corpus of spoken French has been assembled from the much more formal context of television news. This second corpus derives from the following sources:

(i) A corpus collected in 1993 by Christina Lindqvist, and published in 2001. The transcripts include the speech of the newsreader and any studio guests, but exclude the filmed reports from journalists. Much of the speech is scripted, and no doubt read from a teleprompter, but some is spontaneous, notably the interviews with studio guests, who naturally are well-known public figures such as politicians. The presenters include media personalities such as Claire Chazal, Bruno Masure, Christine Ockrent and Patrick Poivre d'Arvor.

(ii) *Actualités TV Presse* (Dyson and Worth Stylianou, 1991), a published collection of 24 reports (from 1988–1990) for use with advanced learners of French. These transcripts include not only the newsreader's introduction, but also the voice-over of the reporter and the speech of persons interviewed during the filmed reports.

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(iii) *Télé-Textes* (Broady and Meinhof, 1995), a similar collection of 18 reports (from 1991–1994).
(iv) The 'Newcastle reports', an unpublished collection of 19 news reports (from 1986–1990), again assembled primarily for use with advanced learners of French.

Overall the language in the TV news corpus is much more formal than that of the Picardy corpus, but it is not entirely homogeneous, given that it includes numerous brief extracts of interviews with a wide range of people, including ordinary members of the public. In addition, it is quite possible that the frequency of *l'on* might be somewhat less than in, say, interviews or speeches featuring politicians, since newsreaders and reporters often need to speak quite rapidly in order to convey a large amount of information: *l'on* is one segment longer than *on*, and *que l'on* is two segments longer than *qu'on*.

5 THE REFERENCE OF *ON* AND *L'ON*

It is well known that *(l')on* in modern French can take on a range of different meanings. Some grammarians and others have laid emphasis on the way that *(l')on* can apparently replace almost any of the other personal pronouns in particular situations, as in the sometimes condescending use of *on* to refer to an addressee:

(14) *On* se calme!

However, these uses are highly marked stylistically, in that they are restricted to rather particular situations and often convey special connotations. In addition, corpus-based studies have suggested that such instances are very infrequent indeed – though it is quite likely that they are more frequent in everyday language than in the interviews that provide the data for most spoken corpora.

Several analysts have suggested that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the reference of *(l')on* can be categorised as one of the following, expressed in terms of semantic features:

[+definite, +speaker, +one or more others], equivalent to *nous*;
[−definite, +/− speaker, +/− hearer], equivalent to *tu* and *vous* in their general indefinite functions;
[−definite, −speaker, −hearer, +others], equivalent to the exclusive indefinite use of *ils*.

These are broadly the 'definitions' employed by Laberge (1977) in her large-scale analysis of variation between *on* and other personal subject pronouns in Montreal French. Laberge discusses in detail the various contextual clues that enable one to interpret individual cases of *on* in terms of the reference intended by the speaker. These clues include plural predicate agreement (which, in (15), forces a reading equivalent to *nous*), a coreferential 3rd person singular possessive determiner (which means *l'on* in (16) has general indefinite reference) and a non-coreferential 1st person

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pronoun (in (17), which suggests the exclusive indefinite):

(15) *on* est pas **des spécialistes** de la machine à écrire non plus. (4.3.6)
(16) il paraît que *l'on* rêve toujours dans **sa** langue maternelle (2.1.11)
(17) et puis un beau jour *on* **nous** envoie dans les Alpes. (11.4.20)

Blanche-Benveniste illustrates particularly clearly how the presence in the same clause of other personal pronouns helps to disambiguate between the different uses of *on* (1987: 22–23). However, it is often the case that the reference of *on* can be determined only with the help of the situational context.

Along with Laberge, Boutet similarly recognises the above three types where the reference of *on* is clear-cut (1994: 110), but she emphasises that elsewhere *on* is often ambiguous or indeterminate and that this can sometimes lead to misunderstandings in conversation. Stewart (1985) focuses on such indeterminate cases of *on*, showing how, in potentially conflictual situations such as formal meetings, *on* often serves as a strategy to reduce the impact of face-threatening acts such as orders and criticisms.

Some have argued that the frequent indeterminacy of *(l')on* means that it is impossible to undertake a quantitative analysis of how it varies with other pronouns (such as *nous* on the one hand, or indefinite *tu/vous* on the other), since one cannot be sure how many instances of *on* are genuinely equivalent to the other pronoun with which it is in variation. (For further discussion of these issues, see Lavandera, 1978, and Milroy and Gordon, 2003.)

The approach adopted here (and in other related studies: Coveney, 2000, 2003b) is to acknowledge the indeterminacy of some occurrences of *(l')on*, but nevertheless to attempt a quantification of the variation. For the purposes of this and other analyses of variation in the use of *on* in the Picardy corpus, each occurrence of *(l')on* has been categorised for its reference into one of five groups. Two of these, (i) and (v) below, indicate that the reference is clear-cut as either definite or indefinite, while the other three represent degrees of ambiguity between definite and indefinite reference:

(i) certainly [+definite, +speaker, +other/s], i.e. equivalent to *nous*: (N = 1,059).
(ii) probably, but not certainly, [+definite, +speaker, +other/s]: (N = 193).
(iii) ambiguous between [+definite] and [−definite]: (N = 964).
(iv) probably, but not certainly, [−definite]: (N = 122).
(v) certainly [−definite], i.e. not equivalent to *nous*: (N = 717).

(For the purposes of this classification, no distinction has been made between inclusive and exclusive indefinite reference.) The number of tokens classified in each of these five categories is indicated in parentheses, the total for the whole Picardy corpus being 3,055.

In contrast with the controversies over the equivalence of the variants of some other grammatical variables, it appears that no-one has ever claimed that there is a systematic difference of meaning between *l'on* and *on*. However, as was mentioned earlier, it has been suggested that the reference of *l'on* is more restricted than that

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Table 3. *The frequencies of* on *and* l'on *in the two corpora of spoken French*

	N of *l'on*	N of *on*	% of *l'on*
TV news corpus	36	458	7.3%
Picardy corpus	37	3,018	1.2%

of *on*, specifically that the former is never used as an equivalent of *nous*. This is one of the issues to be addressed in our examination of the two corpora.

6 RESULTS

For the purposes of quantification, incomplete utterances (notably, those lacking a verb) have been excluded and involuntary repetitions of either *on* or *l'on* have been counted as a single occurrence:

(18) alors avec des ados *on* – étant donné qu'on peut pas tenir cet interdit-là (2.2.46)

(19) et *on* ne / *on* – *on* ne vérifie pas combien de lettres ils écrivent (2.3.15)

The reason for excluding such tokens is that some speakers are more prone to such minor dysfluencies than are others, and counting such repetitions as two or more tokens would therefore mean that such speakers would have an undue influence on the overall quantitative results. In the Picardy corpus, the number of such occurrences is 394. A second type of exclusion concerns examples of *(l')on* produced by non-native speakers: not only, of course, the interviewer in the Picardy corpus, but also one of the studio guests in Lindqvist's corpus (2001), since he is from francophone Africa (and so cannot be assumed to be a native speaker). The only linguistic context in which certain tokens of *on* have been excluded from the count is that of subject-verb inversion. This pattern, which is not found at all with *on* in the Picardy corpus, occurs extremely rarely in the TV news corpus, as in the following example:

(20) Une cinquantaine de personnes auraient, *dit-on*, manqué aujourd'hui leur rendez-vous avec l'avion [. . .] (Broady and Meinhof, 1995: 79)

As was mentioned earlier, *l'on* has been unacceptable in this context since at least the 17th century, and so we can safely conclude that no native speaker would ever now invert with *l'on*.

The quantitative results of this study can shed light on the three research questions that were set out in the Introduction: how frequent is *l'on* in speech? Does it have the same range of referents there as *on*? And do the linguistic contexts in which it is used conform to the rules of grammarians?

The global frequencies of *l'on* and *on* in the two corpora are shown in Table 3. Contrary to what has sometimes been asserted, the data demonstrate that *l'on* does indeed occur in spoken French, not only, as one might expect in the TV news corpus, which includes much scripted language, but also very occasionally in the

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Table 4. *The six users of* l'on *in the Picardy corpus*

Speaker	Sex	Age	Class	*l'on* N	*l'on*% (~ *on*)	*nous*% (~ *on*)	*ne*%	*on*% (~ *tu/vous*)	*tu* or *vous*
2	M	35	H	26	8.4	0.6	21	24	T
11	M	37	I	4	4.1	11	19	8	V
15	F	18	I	3	1.9	0	29	100	(T)
21	F	57	I	2	2.2	71	47	24	V
22	M	35	H	1	1.3	0	43	63	T
27	M	17	W	1	1.0	0	26	100	(T)
Mean for all 30 informants:					1.2	4	18	52	

Note: Class: H = higher, I = intermediate, W = working.
Percentages other than for *l'on* have mostly been rounded off to whole figures. (T) indicates that the speaker used *tu* just once as the address pronoun.

spontaneous and relatively informal speech of the Picardy interviews. (It is worth recalling that the rate of use of *l'on* after *que* that Goosse found in a sample of literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries was 78/200, i.e. 39%.)

An obvious follow-up question is: who uses *l'on* in these corpora? In the TV news corpus, it is unsurprising to find that examples of *l'on* are produced not only in the largely scripted speech of the reporters and presenters (e.g. Claire Chazal and Patrick Poivre d'Arvor), but also by some of the studio guests in the Lindqvist corpus, such as the politicians Alain Madelin and Jacques Toubon. The results for the Picardy corpus are more striking in that they show that twenty-four of the thirty informants did not use *l'on* at all during their interview: the 37 tokens of *l'on* were produced by just six speakers, as can be seen in Table 4. This shows also that 26 of the 37 occurrences came from informant 2, a 35 year old male secondary teacher, but since he also produced a very large number of tokens of plain *on* (310), his relative frequency of use of *l'on* is a modest 8.4% (a little higher than the overall figure in the TV news corpus).

One might imagine that this particular informant spoke in a generally more formal style than the others, but other variable aspects of his linguistic behaviour do not in fact bear this out. As Table 4 shows, his frequency for use of *nous* (as opposed to definite *on*) is just 0.6%, his 21% rate of *ne* retention is only very slightly higher than the average for the corpus as a whole (21% compared with 18%) and he has one of the lowest scores for indefinite *on* (as opposed to indefinite *tu*). In qualitative terms, his interview is one of the most informal in the corpus: not only does he frequently use *tu* to address the interviewer, but his responses to questions are long and spontaneous, and he in fact more or less takes control of the topic of conversation. In short, apart from his frequent use of *l'on*, his language cannot generally be described as formal or 'conservative' (in the sense of favouring older variants of sociolinguistic variables). We shall consider another factor that may help account for his use of *l'on* when we are examining the effect of linguistic context on the variation between *on* and *l'on*.

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In contrast with informant 2, most of the other users of *l'on* do indeed show other signs of formal or more conservative speech during their interview. Two of them (11 and 21) used *vous* to address the interviewer, and are also among the handful of frequent users of *nous*. Speakers 21 and 22 have two of the highest scores for *ne* retention in the corpus (47% and 42%), also suggesting a more formal speech style. The two young informants in Table 4 (15 and 27) used the address pronoun *tu* only once in the interview and used indefinite *on* categorically (100%), to the total exclusion of indefinite *tu*. The same two speakers have rather high rates of *ne* retention for young people (29% and 26%).

One might well suppose that occurrences of *l'on* would tend to cluster together in more formal sections of the interview, and to co-occur with other obvious markers of formality. There appears to be some evidence to support this supposition, but the picture is not entirely clear-cut. A few cases of *l'on* in the Picardy corpus do indeed co-occur with a formal marker such as *lequel*, or, in the example below, *ce sont*:

(21) *ce sont* des des des mots que / que que que *l'on* sait par par les grands-mères (27.4.63)

However, this is by no means systematic and speaker 2 on one occasion even juxtaposes *l'on* with the informal lexical item *truc*:

(22) le truc qui / que *l'on* met dedans (2.5.37)

We also find a few instances in both corpora where there are two tokens of *l'on* in rapid succession, and where it is tempting to conclude that the speaker has temporarily shifted to a more formal style. In the example below from a TV news item, the mayor of a town that has recently suffered severe flooding is being interviewed and appeals to the outside world for help:

(23) Faites en sorte que *l'on* reprenne courage, et que *l'on* puisse mener à bien la tâche que nous ont confiée nos concitoyens et puis pensons à ceux qui ont tout perdu [. . .] (Broady and Meinhof, 1995: 74)

(Notice also here two other markers of formality: the stylistic inversion of *nos concitoyens* in the third subordinate clause and the 1st person imperative form *pensons*.) Informant 2 in the Picardy corpus has a section mid-way through his interview where he produces twelve tokens of *l'on* in the space of about 5 minutes. But he also uses plain *on* about twenty-six times in the same passage, and the topic of conversation in this section is not of an obviously more formal nature than in the rest of the recording.

The second research question posed at the outset of this article asked whether *l'on* had the same possible referents as *on*. Not surprisingly, there are numerous examples of *l'on* in the Picardy corpus where it is clearly equivalent to *on* in its general indefinite function, as in the following:

(24) [describing how a game is played] une petite balle que *l'on* frappe avec une batte (22.4.66)

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Table 5. *Occurrences of* l'on *in two spoken corpora*

	Picardy corpus		TV news corpus
	l'on	*on*	*l'on*
*que*__	36	122	26
hiatus (*mais, si, et, où . . .*)	1 (*où*)	103	9 (3 *et*, 5 *où*, 1 *puis*)
after phonetic consonant	0	81	0
at the start of a sentence	0	193	1
*dont*___	0	1	0
___ /l/	0	59	0
*que*___ /kɔ̃/	0	0	0

Less predictable, on the other hand, is the fact that there are also several examples (all produced by speaker 2) of *l'on* having definite reference corresponding to *nous*, for example:

(25) c'est vrai que *l'on* forme un groupe // euh – dans lequel les relations priment tout le reste tu vois? (2.9.27)

This evidence contradicts the assertion that *l'on* can never be equivalent to *nous* in the same way that *on* often is. However, it is clear that this use is quite restricted, and indeed excluded from some contexts. Although there are seventy tokens of disjunctive *nous* + *on* in the corpus, there are no instances of *nous* + *l'on*, and it seems very likely that this sequence is unacceptable, or virtually so. In contrast with the two other types of reference, there appear to be no examples of *l'on* with exclusive indefinite reference in either the Picardy corpus or the TV news corpus, but we should perhaps not attach too much significance to this fact, since occurrences of *on* (or of the more informal *ils*) with exclusive indefinite reference are quite infrequent in these data also.

The third research question posed at the outset of this article concerned the linguistic contexts in which *l'on* occurs in spoken French. Table 5 focuses on the six Picardy informants who used *l'on* at least once, and shows the number of instances of both *on* and *l'on* that they produced in seven contexts which are said by grammarians strongly to favour *l'on* on the one hand or *on* on the other. (For comparison, the figures for *l'on* in the TV news corpus are also provided.) These results show that, in the Picardy corpus, *l'on* almost only ever occurs when it is preceded by *que*. The pattern is slightly different in the TV news corpus, where there is a modest number of tokens of *l'on* following monosyllabic conjunctions and where it can be said to prevent a hiatus. After a phonetic consonant, before a word-initial /l/ and at the start of a sentence, *l'on* is categorically avoided in the Picardy corpus, and there is just one example of the last of these in the TV news data, during a reporter's voice-over:

(26) Exemple: *l'on* peut, à trois heures du matin, consulter l'horaire du TGV Paris-Dijon [. . .] (Dyson and Worth-Stylianou, 1991: 97)

(There is a silent pause after *exemple*.) The table shows just one token of *on* following *dont* for these six Picardy informants (and none of *l'on*), since *dont* is quite rare in

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Table 6. *The frequency of* l'on *after que (Picardy informant 2)*

	N of *l'on*	*N* of *on*	*% l'on*
conjunction *que*	7	26	21.2%
relative *que*	19	17	52.8%

informal French. The evidence concerning the supposed cacophony of *qu'on* + *con-/com-* is similarly inconclusive, since it emerges that this context is actually rather infrequent in the spoken data examined here.

Another aspect of the linguistic context concerns the constraint relating to the nature of a preceding *que*, as discovered by Goosse in his sample of literary texts. As was mentioned above, he found that *l'on* was more frequent after relative pronoun *que* than after conjunction *que*. Table 5 showed that, of the thirty-seven tokens of *l'on* in the Picardy corpus, all but one came after *que*. Speaker 2 is the only Picardy informant who has sufficient quantities of *que l'on* to enable a comparison to be made with Goosse's literary data. (But we may note that all ten tokens of *que l'on* produced by the five other informants involved *que* as a relative pronoun.) Table 6 shows the effect of the grammatical category of *que* on speaker 2's use of *l'on* vs *on*. Of course it is necessary to exercise caution in discussing the results of just one speaker, and the number of tokens here is fairly small (albeit still adequate to provide relative frequencies that are reliable: cf. Milroy and Gordon, 2003). On the face of it, Table 6 shows that, like the literary sources examined by Goosse, informant 2 uses *l'on* more often when the preceding *que* is a relative pronoun (52.8%), rather than when it is a conjunction (21.2%).

This result suggests that Goosse's constraint applies not only to carefully crafted written language, but also to relatively informal spontaneous speech for speakers who use *l'on*. How are we to interpret this finding? Where *que* is a relative pronoun, it is also the object of the following verb, and it is arguable that, for both production and comprehension, this involves a more difficult structure to process than where *que* is a conjunction and the unmarked SV(O) word order is maintained. Some speakers, such as informant 2 (and many writers) select the longer form *que l'on* rather than *qu'on*, possibly to help both themselves and their addressees, since it adds substance to the two forms, which otherwise consist of just one segment each (/k/ and /ɔ̃/). A related observation is that a good number of the relative pronouns followed by *l'on* in the Picardy corpus form part of a structure that serves to highlight a proposition or even a new topic. In several cases, this structure is a pseudo-cleft, as in the example below:

(27) alors ce que *l'on* fait c'est que *l'on* s'accorde des trucs du genre / un ga un gars un animateur ou une animatrice qui en peut plus et qui est crevé / eh bien i dit 'bon ben moi écoutez les copains le matin vous m voyez pas je décompresse ben jusqu'à midi euh / je décompresse' tu vois à un moment où on est tous là / il décompresse sur le camp il va dormir i fait son petit truc s'il a envie d'aller s balader il va s balader /(2.5.63)

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7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The examination of the two corpora has confirmed that *l'on* is indeed used in spoken French, but only marginally in informal speech style. Moreover, *l'on* can in fact be used as an equivalent of *nous* (though this is not common), but it remains to be seen how often it is used with exclusive indefinite reference, in variation with *ils*. The only context in which *l'on* occurs moderately often is after *que*, especially when the latter is a relative pronoun. One informant in the Picardy corpus used *que l'on* quite frequently even though other features of his speech did not suggest a particularly formal style. It seems probable that this speaker habitually used *l'on* as a device to enhance the clarity of potentially complex relative clauses. In the TV news corpus and in the speech of the other Picardy informants who occasionally used *l'on*, it does seem reasonable to see this as a marker of formal speech.

The use of *l'on* in intervocalic contexts (including *que l'on*) can be regarded as another device whereby the canonic syllabic pattern (CV.CV.) of spoken French is reinforced. Other phenomena that have this effect include *enchaînement* (linking), liaison, elision and the 'euphonic' *t* used after inverted 3rd-person singular verbs that end in a vowel (cf. Gadet, 1989: 64–65). Several of these features are associated more with formal speech style. In a slightly different perspective, one could see *l'on* as another example of an optional 'long form', alongside optional liaison, *(de) l'un*, *cela* and *ce sont*. With a preceding *que* (the most common context), the parallel with these other forms is striking:

/kɔ̃/ → /kə lɔ̃/, /dœ̃/ → /də lœ̃/, /sa/ → /səla/, /sɛ/ → /sə sɔ̃/

(*Nous* and the *-ons* verb form could also be included in this group.) The various 'long' forms add phonetic substance, which can help listeners identify the words they hear, and they also slow down (albeit marginally) the rate at which utterances are produced. In sociolinguistic terms, they help distinguish an individual's speech from ordinary everyday spoken language, making it more similar to the conservative, written word.

In quantifying the variation between *l'on* and *on*, the only linguistically defined context that was excluded *a priori* as categorical was where *on* follows an inverted verb. In future studies of *l'on* in the spoken language, there would be a case for excluding from the count those contexts where *l'on* has been shown to be completely absent: e.g. before word-initial *l* and following disjunctive *nous*. Some set expressions, aphorisms and proverbs probably allow for just one of the two variants (most often *on*) and should therefore also be excluded from quantification of the variation:

(28) *On* reconnaît l'arbre à ses fruits.
(29) *On* doit manger pour vivre mais pas vivre pour manger.

But Old French proverbs did sometimes have the form with the article:

(30) *L'en* ne doit semer toute sa semence en ung champ (Muller, 1970: 48)

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Is the alternation between *l'on* and *on* in fact a sociolinguistic variable, and if so of what type? We have seen that, at least in the Picardy corpus, *l'on* has relatively limited social significance, for the simple reason that it is entirely absent from the speech of all but six informants. In the more formal style represented by the TV news corpus, *l'on* is a little more in evidence. In general, it seems that *l'on* has more stylistic than social significance, and in this sense the alternation with *on* may be described as a 'hyperstyle' variable, alongside the *nous* ~ *on* variable and others. (The concept of 'hyperstyle' variables was first suggested by Bell, 1984). But is the *l'on* ~ *on* variable a phonological or grammatical phenomenon? One might wish to classify it as 'grammatical' for one of two reasons: either because it involves the presence or absence of the article, or because it involves an alternation between two pronouns. But in *l'on* the *l'* clearly no longer functions as an article, and, on the other hand, the forms *on* and *l'on* are not as distinct from each other as competing variants such as *nous* vs *on*. As a 'long form', *l'on* is comparable in several respects to variable liaison, except that the optional consonant comes at the start rather than the end of the word. There is thus a case for considering *l'on* ~ *on* as a rather special kind of phonological variable, and, other things being equal, one might reasonably predict that there would be a correlation between its use and that of optional liaison.

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