

THE POWER OF THE FRENCH “ON” IN EDITORIALS

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Abstract

The French elite daily, *Le Monde*, in its stylistic guide, explicitly recommends its journalists to stay away from *ON*, the third person singular indefinite pronoun : “*l’usage répété du ‘on’ est déconseillé*” (Le Monde 2002: 48). However, 237 *ON* have been recorded in 101 editorials from a corpus of 150 editorials published from August 1999 to July 2001. *Le Monde*’s purpose in advocating the avoidance of *ON* is that of being clear and precise. Thus, why does it include it so often? This article looks at who *ON* ‘covers’ under its guise of anonymity, where it intervenes in the *hierarchical structure* of the *argumentation*, what it says, and to which ends *Le Monde* lets *ON*’s *voice* be heard. It appears that the danger and power of *ON*, the reason for prohibiting its use and the necessity behind its actual use hold in one word: its indefiniteness.

The inclusion of others’ voices in a text, i.e. intertextuality or polyphony, is a phenomenon that has attracted some interest among scholars of media discourse (Le 2003; Waugh 1995; Wortham and Locher 1996). These voices can be expressed with a variety of evidentials: direct and indirect speech, passive voice, metapragmatic verb, reference and predication, or epistemic modalization (Le 2004). The French language has at its disposal a ‘special’ pronoun, *ON* (3rd person singular – subject), that allows “indefinite others” to take an active part in the debate represented by the textual argumentation.¹ *ON* has been the object of a number of studies (Atlani 1984; Blanche-Benveniste 2003; Le Bel 1991; Leeman 1991; Viollet 1988): they mostly deal with its referents, but not with its discursive functions. A discursive function is realized within a discursive context, i.e. the co-text and the socio-cultural context in which the text is produced and received. This article investigates how *ON* is used and to which purpose(s) in media discourse, particularly in editorials, but for reasons of length, this article deals only with the co-text in which *ON* is used. While *ON* may represent a variety of voices, it is still introduced by the pen of editorialists who write in the name of the media they work for by exposing its official position (in the case of unsigned editorials). Thus the question is raised as to how *ON* is used in the enactment of the media’s identity.

All children going through the French educational system hear of the infamy of *ON* often times during their school years. *ON* is to be avoided by all means, as one is supposed to know which company one keeps. The French elite daily, *Le Monde*, is of the same mind. In its stylistic guide, it explicitly recommends its journalists to stay away from *ON* : “*l’usage répété du ‘on’ est déconseillé*” (Le Monde 2002: 48). However, just as school children cannot ignore *ON*, neither do French literary figures nor does *Le Monde*. Indeed, 237 *ON* have been recorded in 101 editorials from a corpus of 150 editorials published from August 1999 to July 2001. *Le Monde*’s purpose in advocating the avoidance of *ON* is that of being clear and precise. Thus, why does it include it so often? On the basis of this corpus, this article looks at who *ON* ‘covers’ under its guise of

¹ There is no single translation for *ON* in English. For questions of simplicity, *ON* is always translated in this article by “one”.

anonymity, where it intervenes in the hierarchical structure of the argumentation, what it says, and to which ends *Le Monde* lets *ON*'s voice be heard.

The first part of the article exposes the methodological framework in which the corpus was analyzed (1). The second part presents how *ON* 'breaks' *Le Monde*'s apparent monolog by involving the voice of others (2). The third part shows how *Le Monde* implicates *ON* as an opponent or an accomplice (3). Finally, the conclusion underlines the power of *ON* as a rhetorical tool (4).

1 Methodology

This (restricted) analysis of the discursive functions of *ON* is grounded on the investigation of the place of *ON* in its co-text. *ON* is situated within the text hierarchical structure thanks to a coherence analysis (1.1) and to a speech act analysis that indicates for which communicative ends *ON* is used (1.2). These types of analysis are applied to a corpus of 150 editorials (1.3).

1.1 Coherence analysis

A coherence analysis (Le 1996; Le 2006), based on a model of processes of text production and interpretation that integrates text linguistics and cognitive psychology (Daneš 1989; Hobbs 1985; Kintsch 1988; Kintsch 1998; van Dijk 1980), reveals the editorials' hierarchical structure. Logico-semantic rules (coordination, subordination, and superordination) are applied to the semantic content of sentences; by differentiating between them on the basis of their degree of abstractness / generality of information, they uncover the text hierarchical structure. This process is conducted in two stages. First, the analysis is done between sentences within paragraphs so as to make apparent the paragraph hierarchical structure. The first most abstract sentence (i.e. at the highest hierarchical level) is generally the theme of the paragraph (Th); representing the paragraph aboutness, it constitutes the starting point of the argumentation. Correspondingly, the last sentence at the highest hierarchical level is generally the paragraph macrostructure (Mcr); as the paragraph gist, it is what is most likely to remain in long term memory (van Dijk 1980: 254). Second, the same process is followed between the various macrostructures of the text, and results in displaying the theme(s) and macrostructure(s) of the complete text (TTh, TMcr). This recursive coherence analysis is verified when the paragraph theme(s) and macrostructure(s) form an accurate summary of the text, and the text theme(s) and macrostructure(s) provide an accurate text abstract.

1.2 Speech act analysis

As stated in the previous section, macrostructures, especially text macrostructures, contain the most salient information in the text. Because they represent the gist of the information given at the paragraph and text levels, (text) macrostructural sentences are coded in terms of the speech act they represent. Once macrostructures have been coded in terms of speech acts, they are also coded as to which evaluation (positive - pos, negative - neg, or neutral - neu) of their informational content they contain.

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Among the diverse classifications of speech acts, this study uses the four types of communicative illocutionary acts that are proposed by Bach and Harnish in *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (1979: 41):

Constatives express the speaker's belief and his intention or desire that the hearer have or form a like belief. *Directives* express the speaker's attitude toward some prospective action by the hearer and his intention that his utterance, or the attitude it expresses, be taken as a reason for the hearer's action. *Commissives* express the speaker's intention and belief that his utterance obligates him to do something (perhaps under certain conditions). And *acknowledgments* express feelings regarding the hearer or, in cases where the utterance is clearly perfunctory or formal, the speaker's intention that his utterance satisfy [sic] a social expectation to express certain feelings and his belief that it does.

The different subcategories within each of these four types of communicative illocutionary acts (Bach and Harnish 1979: 41) are very useful for the categorization of macrostructures into the four general types. However, they are of no other use in this study, and thus macrostructures are presented here only in terms of the four general types: constatives (1), directives (2), commissives (3), and acknowledgments (4).

(1) Constatives (CON):

- a. 052-2-6:² *Ehoud Barak est un dirigeant singulier : froid, cérébral, travailleur acharné, mais aussi chaleureux, ouvert et imaginatif.* ('Ehoud Barak is a peculiar leader: cold, intellectual, hard-working, but also welcoming, open and creative')

(2) Directives (DIR):

In the corpus, directives take the form of (a) an "obligation/defense" (i.e. no choice is given to the addressee), (b) an "advice" (i.e. the addressee is offered a suggestion), and (c) a "warning" (i.e. the addressee is made aware of a potential negative consequence, and thus implicitly told to act in order to avoid it).

- a. 007-6-21: *Il doit, en tout cas, reprendre rapidement l'initiative, sur le terrain politique.* ('In any case, it must quickly start again to look for political solutions')
- b. 096-4-25: *Ce serait un immense service rendu au pays.* ('It would be of great help to the country')
- c. 294-4-30: "*Une catastrophe nous attend*". ('A catastrophe is awaiting us')

(3) Commissives:

- a. 641-4-23: *Le Monde approuve la mise en garde de The Economist.* ('Le Monde approves The Economist's warning')

(4) Acknowledgements:

- a. 128-5-20: *Et c'est tant mieux.* ('And this is for the best')

1.3 Corpus

² Each example is preceded by three numbers. The first one refers to the rank of the editorial in the corpus. The second one refers to the rank of the paragraph to which the example belongs. The third one refers to the rank of the example among all sentences.

These analyses are conducted on a corpus of *Le Monde*'s editorials published from August 1999 to July 2001. During this two-year period, *Le Monde* published 619 editorials; 276 of them dealt with internal politics (44.58%), 285 with external politics (46.04%) and 58 with European politics (9.36%). This study is part of a larger project on *Le Monde*'s identities, and the period covered by the corpus is characterized by a number of events that make its study particularly relevant for issues of identity construction. On the internal political stage, a number of important "cohabitation" issues arose between a right-wing President of the Republic and a left-wing Prime Minister. The international stage was marked by the arrival of a hitherto unknown politician, Vladimir Putin, who was appointed Prime Minister of the Russian Federation in August 1999 and elected its President in March 2000. As for the European Union, it was in deep institutional debates about its impending enlargement from 15 to 25 members (May 2004). As *Le Monde*'s interactions in the public sphere are likely to be dependent on the type of topics *Le Monde* engages in, the corpus needs to reflect these different types of topics. Thus, the corpus consists in four groups of editorials. The first comprises all editorials (38) about internal politics whose topic is linked to a top front-page article in the same day issue. Top front-page articles, being the most salient, deal with issues the newspaper deems most relevant (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998). The second group contains all editorials on Russia (33). The third group is composed of all editorials (26) about the European Union that deal with institutional matters or relations with other States. Finally, in the fourth group, editorials were randomly chosen among those that did not belong to any of the previous groups in such a manner that the internal composition of this group reflected the overall distribution of types of topics treated in editorials during the chosen period. Thus, the fourth group contains 53 editorials: 24 deal with internal politics (45.28%), 24 with external politics (45.28%), and 5 with Europe (9.43%). In total, the corpus is composed of 150 editorials (*circa* 60,000 words), i.e. 24.23% of all editorials published from August 1999 to July 2001.

The entire corpus was coded by the author. To verify the stability of the coding, 33 randomly chosen editorials (22% of the total corpus) were re-coded independently by a graduate student. After comparison of the results, 3.7% of the codes for these 33 editorials were revised. Then the coding of the entire corpus was checked for any discrepancy between the original and revised coding. The resulting coding of the corpus is considered stable enough for reliable results.

The editorials' analysis in terms of coherence and speech acts provides the text structure within which it is possible to situate *ON* and see how it operates in the text argumentation. However, first it is necessary to examine who *ON* represents.

2 *ON* as an 'umbrella' speaker

On serait alors cette personne première de l'univers humain, ce que Nicolas Ruwet nomme 'le sujet de conscience primordial'; il est le moyen par lequel celui qui parle se masque, se fond dans une masse plus ou moins vaste, indéfinie. *On* établit le cadre d'un discours anonyme, dont la validité est présentée comme valant relativement à une communauté. (Leeman 1991: 105)

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ON hides a multitude of speakers depending on its use. It can represent speakers who are identifiable by certain characteristics (e.g. geographical location) as indicated in the co-text and among which *Le Monde* does not figure (2.1); or it can include *Le Monde* and other, non-identified, speakers (2.2).

2.1 *ON* as “others” (i.e. excluding *Le Monde*)

In the first case, *ON* is defined by opposition, or by its location, a place where *Le Monde* cannot be, and thus it excludes *Le Monde*. For example, in (5a) 007-5-17, *ON* represents the government (at least partly – see 007-5-16) to which *Le Monde* tells not to present (Corsican) nationalists as devils. In (5b) 178-1-1, *ON* is a member of the Italian political world.

- (5) a. 007-5-16: *La première responsabilité du gouvernement est de faire le maximum pour ramener la paix civile et favoriser un nouveau départ de l'île.* (‘The government’s first responsibility is to do the maximum for the return of civil peace and to facilitate the island’s new beginning’)
- b. 007-5-17: *Ce n'est pas en diabolisant les nationalistes qu'on résorbera l'abcès.* (‘It is not by demonizing nationalists that one will be able to relieve the tension’)
- c. 178-1-1: *D'un bout à l'autre du spectre politique italien, on sait pardonner, oublier.* (‘From one side of the Italian political spectrum to the other, one knows how to forgive, how to forget’)

Let us now consider the second case, when *ON* includes *Le Monde* and other, non-identified, speakers.

2.2 *ON* and *Le Monde*'s functions

When *ON* includes *Le Monde*, it is used to represent one of *Le Monde*'s functions. Before looking in detail at the function(s) of this specific *ON*, it is necessary to compare its use with that of other means to represent *Le Monde*. *Le Monde*'s editorialists use five metadiscursive means to represent themselves, alone or with others: “*Le Monde*”, “*nous / nos*” (markers of the first person plural), questions, use of the imperative, and *ON*. The analysis of these markers shows that they are used in relation to three functions: news provider (2.2.1), social actor in the public sphere (2.2.2), or representative of a larger group (2.2.3). Once these functions are defined, it is possible to examine their distribution and the use of *ON* for each one of them (2.2.4).

2.2.1 *Le Monde* as a news provider

Le Monde acts as a news provider (LM-news) when in gathering and publishing news, it acts as a witness and a place where exchanges take place. This is the most traditional role of journalism.

- (6) a. 189-2-9: *Trois semaines après l'accablant témoignage publié par le docteur Véronique Vasseur, médecin-chef à la maison d'arrêt de la Santé, à Paris, Le Monde a poursuivi l'enquête.* (‘Three weeks after the overwhelming evidence of Dr. Véronique Vasseur, head-doctor at the Santé prison in Paris, *Le Monde* continued the investigation’) - [LMnews]
- b. 052-1-2: *Le chef du gouvernement israélien, qui s'exprime longuement aujourd'hui dans nos colonnes, est précédé d'une réputation flatteuse.* (‘The

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Israeli government' head, who expresses himself extensively on our pages today, enjoys a favorable repute') - [LMnews]

2.2.2 *Le Monde as a social actor*

Le Monde goes beyond the traditional role of providing news and becomes a social actor in the public sphere (LM-actor) when it does more than gathering and publishing news; as a thinking entity, it takes part in public debates. This role, although not uncommon, has attracted a number of criticisms (Poulet 2003). *Le Monde* appears as a social actor in six different cases.

First case: "*Le Monde*" is a thinking entity that does more than just gathering and publishing news.

- (7) a. 641-4-23: *Le Monde approuve la mise en garde de The Economist*. ('*Le Monde* agrees with *The Economist*'s warning') - [LM-actor]
- b. 659-3-11: *C'est ce même combat que Le Monde, près d'un demi-siècle plus tard, reprend et prolonge en donnant un large écho au témoignage tardif de Paul Aussaresses*. ('It is this same battle that *Le Monde*, almost half a century later, takes up again and continues by largely publishing Paul Aussaresses' late evidence') - [LM-actor]

Second case: "*nous*", "*notre*", or "*nos*" represents "*Le Monde*" or "*Le Monde* and others" (the "others" being left non-identified), and *Le Monde* is doing more than gathering and publishing information.

- (8) a. 419-3-12: *Le document présente à nos yeux une incontestable valeur historique*. ('In our eyes, this document bears an unquestionable historical value') - [LM-actor]
- b. 419-6-23: *S'agissant d'une affaire qui met en jeu le fonctionnement même de la démocratie en France, il est de notre devoir de les assumer*. ('As this affair deals with the very functioning of democracy in France, it is our duty to assume them') - [LM-actor]

Third case: "*ON*" could be replaced by "*nous*", and "*nous*" means "*Le Monde*" or "*Le Monde* and others", and more is done than just gathering and publishing information.

- (9) a. 348-3-9: *On ne peut que se féliciter de ce progrès*. ('One can only rejoice over this progress') - [LM-actor]
- b. 189-4-19: *On sait que la population carcérale est par définition une collectivité à risques*. ('One knows that the prison population is by nature a high-risk collectivity') - [LM-actor]

Fourth case: "*ON*" could be replaced by an imperative at the 2nd person plural. In 171-2-10, *Le Monde* speaks to European leaders (as indicated in 171-3-11) and tells them not to keep on saying that the EU enlargement will result in its deepening (of powers).

- (10) a. 171-2-10: *Mais on ne peut pas continuer à dire que l'élargissement, par la grâce d'on ne sait quelle miraculeuse dynamique, ira de pair avec l'approfondissement de l'Europe*. ('But one cannot keep on saying that the enlargement, thanks to whatever wonderful dynamics, will go hand in hand with Europe's deepening') - [LM-actor]

- b. 171-3-11: *Ce discours-là, que tiennent volontiers les dirigeants européens, est une contre-vérité.* ('This discourse that is often held by European leaders is a mistruth')

Fifth case: by its use of the imperative, *Le Monde* takes part directly and actively in the debate.

- (11) a. 356-1-4: *N'en doutons pas, le modèle risque de faire école.* ('Let us not doubt it, this precedent will be followed') - [LM-actor]

Sixth case: Questions - the following reasoning is based on the premise that a question and its answer are normally given by different parties; when a question and its answer are given by a same agent (i.e. here, the editorialist), this same agent is considered to play the role of different parties. It is those parties that are here of importance and thus coded. Four different sub-cases need to be distinguished.

(12) When the question is not followed by an explicit answer, it is considered that the question is asked by *Le Monde* unless the co-text indicates that it comes from another party. For example, 569-4-22 and 569-4-24 suggest the lack of answers to the questions in 569-4-21 and 569-4-23, and thus *Le Monde* is considered the author of the questions.

- a. 569-4-21: *Cette gesticulation est-elle destinée à pousser Saddam Hussein à la faute afin d'engager une action militaire d'envergure destinée à renverser le régime, le fils "finissant" le travail du père?* ('Is this gesticulation supposed to mislead Saddam Hussein thereby justifying the start of a large military campaign in order to bring the regime down, thus the son would "finish" his father's work?') - [LM-actor]
- b. 569-4-22: *Celui ci n'avait pas voulu, il y a dix ans, pousser ses armées jusqu'à Bagdad et transformer une victoire militaire en succès politique.* ('Ten years ago, the latter had not wanted to take his army to Baghdad and transform his military victory into a political success')
- c. 569-4-23: *Ou au contraire, George W. Bush junior sera-t-il celui qui inversera la diplomatie américaine?* ('Or on the contrary, will George W. Bush junior be the one to reverse American diplomacy?') - [LM-actor]
- d. 569-4-24: *Son équipe est partagée entre les activistes du Pentagone et les diplomates opposés aux interventions militaires.* ('His team comprises Pentagon's activists as well as diplomats who are opposed to military interventions')

(13) When questions contain implicitly their answer, they fulfill a rhetorical function in reinforcing a statement expressed by *Le Monde* (Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul 1994: 400-401).

- a. 069-2-9: *Qui ne s'en féliciterait?* ('Who would not agree with that?') - [LM-actor]

(14) It is considered that *Le Monde* does not ask the question when it explicitly answers it in a different sentence as in 72-6-23/24.

- a. 072-1-1: *Faut-il interdire la vente des cigarettes et autres produits du tabac aux mineurs de moins de seize ans?* ('Should one forbid the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products to less than 16-year olds?') - [question asked by a party other than LM]
- b. 072-6-23: *Le débat est ouvert.* ('The debate is open') - [answer given by LM]

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- c. 072-6-24: *Avant de le trancher, il sera utile d'évaluer les effets qu'ont produits de telles mesures dans les nombreux pays où elles commencent à entrer en vigueur.* ('Before closing it, it will be useful to find out the effects of similar measures in the numerous countries where they have just entered into force') - [answer given by LM]

(15) The question is asked by *Le Monde* when the answer is given by another party. For example, in 610-1-4, "on" represents the Americans in the answer to the question in 610-1-3.

- a. 610-1-3: *L'accord américano-russe sur la limitation des systèmes antimissiles (ABM) ne plaît plus?* ('Were the American-Russian anti-ballistic missile agreement (ABM) not to please any longer?') - [LM-actor]
- b. 610-1-4: *On l'abandonnera, que cela plaise ou non à Moscou.* ('One will denounce it, whether Moscow would like it or not')

2.2.3 *Le Monde* as a representative of society

Finally, *Le Monde* can appear as a representative of society (LM-rep) when the use of "nous", "notre" or "nos" is clearly not limited to represent *Le Monde* only.

- (16) a. 700-3-15: *Or cette vérité nous vient aujourd'hui du Maroc même, où règne depuis deux ans le fils aîné de Hassan II, Mohamed VI.* ('This truth comes to us today from Morocco itself, over which Mohamed VI, Hassan II's older son, has been reigning for two years') - [LM-rep]

2.2.4 Distribution of *Le Monde*'s functions

When one looks at the distribution of *Le Monde*'s functions in all four sub-corpora (table 1), no significant difference appears, i.e. whatever the topic of the editorial, *Le Monde* fulfills the same functions in a similar manner. *Le Monde* functions significantly more often ($p=0$) as a social actor (73.6%) than as a news provider (LM-news) or representative of society (LM-rep) considered together (26.4%).

	Random		Internal		Europe		Russia		Total	
	n	%	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
LM-news	24	24.5	15	20	7	17.5	10	16.7	56	20.5
LM-actor	68	69.4	53	70.7	31	77.5	49	81.7	201	73.6
LM-rep	6	6.1	7	9.3	2	5	1	1.6	16	5.9
Total	98	100	75	100	40	100	60	100	273	100

Table 1: Distribution of *Le Monde*'s functions (in all sentences)

For each of these three functions, table 2 presents the number of times they are represented by each metadiscursive marker. If one looks at the table rows for each function, it appears that each of them is mostly represented by one type of metadiscursive marker: LM-news by "Le Monde" (33/56= 58.9%); LM-actor by *ON* (122/201= 60.7%); and LM-rep by "nous"/"nos" (11/16= 68.8%).³ If one looks at the table columns for the metadiscursive markers, it appears that

³ Only the raw numbers are given in the table and not the percentage for ease of presentation of the table.

“*Le Monde*” (73.3%) and “*nous*”/“*nos*” (43.5%) are in majority used to represent LM-news (significantly more than by *ON*, $p=0$), while *ON* (94.5%), questions (98%) and the imperative (100%) are in majority used to represent LM-actor. LM-actor is by far the most represented function (73.6%), and it is represented by *ON* in 60.7% (122/201) of the cases, significantly more than by any other means ($p<0.01$). *ON* is the most frequently used metadiscursive marker to represent *Le Monde*’s functions in general (47.3%), and in 94.5% of its uses it represents *Le Monde* as a social actor (LM-actor).

	<i>LM</i>		<i>Nous / nos</i>		<i>on</i>		questions		imperative		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
LM-news	33	73.3	20	43.5	3	2.3	0	0	0	0	56	20.5
LM-actor	12	26.7	15	32.6	122	94.5	49	98	3	100	201	73.6
LM-rep	0	0	11	23.9	4	3.1	1	2	0	0	16	5.9
Total n	45	100	46	100	129	100	50	100	3	100	273	100
%	16.5		16.8		47.3		18.3		1.1			100

Table 2: Distribution of metadiscursive markers to represent *Le Monde*’s functions (in all sentences)

Therefore, whether one looks at how LM-actor is represented or which functions *ON* represents, there is a clear connection between *ON* and *Le Monde* acting as a social actor. This is particularly important when one thinks about the fuzziness of whom *ON* stands for, the (criticized) role of LM-actor in the public sphere, and the frequency with which *Le Monde* plays this role (73.6% of all *Le Monde*’s functions).

In conclusion, *ON* as an ‘umbrella’ speaker either excludes *Le Monde* or includes it and, in the great majority of cases, represents *Le Monde* as a social actor.

3 *ON* as an opponent and as an accomplice

Le locuteur est à la fois constitué par la parole de l’autre qui le traverse à son insu (il ne peut dire ni se dire en dehors de la doxa de son temps : c’est le dialogisme); et sujet intentionnel mobilisant les voix et les points de vue pour agir sur son allocutaire (c’est la polyphonie). Loin d’être contradictoire, ces deux conceptions représentent deux facettes complémentaires du sujet parlant et rendent compte de son lien au social à la fois dans ses déterminations, son individuation et son vouloir-dire, qui est aussi un vouloir-faire. (Amossy 2005: 69)

When *ON* does not include *Le Monde* and exclusively represents “others”, *Le Monde* can present the indefiniteness of these others’ identity as a danger and position itself against this danger. Logically, the greater the danger, the more seriously *Le Monde*’s position should be considered.

However, when *Le Monde* includes others in its *ON*-social actor, it creates some sort of complicity with this “other” by empowering it. *Le Monde* flatters this other by giving it an active role on the public stage it might not have claimed for itself and by this token, *Le Monde* influences it. This *ON*-social actor thus takes on a social weight due to its human basis that the addressees cannot ignore. Thus, with the *ON*-social actor, *Le Monde* plays on both sides of the interactions (addressers and addressees) to reach its goals.

To consider the discursive functions of *ON*, *ON* must first be placed within the hierarchical structure of the text, so as to reveal which elements in the argumentation it affects (3.1). Then, a few examples illustrate how *ON* affects the argumentation (3.2).

3.1 The place of *ON* in the argumentation

The place of *ON* in the argumentation must be considered at different levels. Where does *ON* occur in the text hierarchical structure, i.e. in the development of the argumentation or in its main points (i.e. macrostructural sentences)? What type of speech act / macrostructure is *ON* attached to either by leading to it or appearing in it? Are those macrostructures mostly of a positive or negative orientation? Finally and most generally, in what general type of editorials (positive or negative) does *ON* mostly appear?

The position of *ON* within the text hierarchical structure indicates its role within the editorial's argumentation. As table 3 shows, *ON* represents predominantly and similarly (no significant difference) LM-social actor (51.5%) and others (45.6%). As *ON* including *Le Monde* but not representing LM-social actor occurs rarely (7/237; 2.9%), only the two cases of *ON*-social actor and *ON*-others are compared from now on.

Raw data in table 3 show that *ON*-social actor and *ON*-others occur in a similar proportion (no significant difference) in non macrostructural (non-Mcr) positions (*ON*-social actor: $63+27/122= 73.8\%$; *ON*-others: $65+17/108= 75.9\%$), i.e. in the development of the argumentation leading to the semantic content of a macrostructure, and in text macrostructural positions (*ON*-social actor: $7+5/122= 9.8\%$; *ON*-others: $5+3/108= 7.4\%$), i.e. in the editorials' main points.⁴ Thus, it appears that *ON* occurs mainly in the development of the argumentation. This fact is however not particularly surprising when one looks at the total number of non-macrostructural sentences (2597) versus the total number of text macrostructural sentences (307). When this fact is taken into consideration, it appears that *ON*-social actor and *ON*-others are equally distributed (no significant difference) in non macrostructural sentences (*ON*-social actor: $63+27/2597= 3.5\%$; *ON*-others: $65+17/2597= 3.2\%$), and in text macrostructural sentences (*ON*-social actor: $7+5/307= 3.9\%$; *ON*-others: $5+3/307= 2.6\%$). These results also show that *ON*, whether it represents LM-social actor or others, is similarly distributed between non-macrostructural sentences and text macrostructural sentences (*ON*-social actor, non-Mcr: 3.5%, TMcr: 3.9%; *ON*-others, non-Mcr: 3.2%, TMcr: 2.6%). The only significant difference between *ON*-social actor and *ON*-others concerns their thematic position: when *ON* occurs within a paragraph theme, it is more often ($p<0.05$) *ON*-social actor (57.5%) than *ON*-others (36.1%). In other words, *Le Monde* puts itself in the limelight more often than others by starting its argumentation with what it says or does.

	<i>ON</i> / LM-actor		<i>ON</i> / LM-not actor		<i>ON</i> / others		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
- ⁵	63	48.1	3	7.3	65	49.6	131	100
Th	27	57.5	3	6.4	17	36.1	47	100
Mcr	11	64.7	-	-	6	35.3	17	100

⁴ Non macrostructural sentences appear in rows 1 (-) and 2 (Th) of table 3. Text macrostructural sentences appear in rows 6 (TMcr) and 7 (TThMcr) of table 3.

⁵ - : sentence that is neither a theme nor a macrostructure at any level.

ThMcr ⁶	2	66.6	-	-	1	33.3	3	100
TTh	7	38.9	-	-	11	61.1	18	100
TMcr	7	58.3	-	-	5	41.7	12	100
TThMcr ⁷	5	55.6	1	11.1	3	33.3	9	100
Total	122	51.5	7	2.9	108	45.6	237	100

Table 3: Positions of ON in the editorials' hierarchical structure

If we look at the types of macrostructures (in terms of speech act and positive / negative orientation) ON is linked to (table 4), we see that ON appears in a similar proportion (no significant difference) in each type of macrostructure whether it represents *Le Monde* as a social actor or excludes *Le Monde* (with one exception – see below).⁸ Furthermore, when one takes into account the percentage of each type of macrostructures, then it appears that both types of ON are proportionally distributed between them. The only exception to the above findings concerns the cases of ON leading to or appearing in a macrostructural directive with a negative orientation (DIRneg). In this latter case, ON-others (23.1%) occurs significantly ($p < 0.05$) more often than ON-social actor (13.1%), and affects proportionally significantly ($p < 0.05$) more macrostructures DIRneg than other types (14.6% of all Mcr are DIRneg, but 23.1% of ON-others appear in DIRneg). In conclusion, ON-social actor is not used to affect one type of macrostructure proportionally more than another, but ON-others affects proportionally more macrostructural directives with a negative orientation (for an example, see 3.2, “*Loi de la jungle en Guyane*”).

	ON / LM-actor		ON / others		All Mcr	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
CONpos	28	22.9	18	16.7	193	22.1
CONneg	59	48.4	53	49	419	48
DIRpos	1	0.8	1	1	22	2.5
DIRneg	16	13.1	25	23.1	127	14.6
OTHpos	3	2.5	-	-	5	0.6
OTHneg	6	4.9	-	-	8	1
Neutral	9	7.4	11	10.2	98	11.2
Total	122	100	108	100	872	100

Table 4: Types of macrostructural speech acts in which ON appears

In regard to the positive, negative or neutral orientation of the macrostructure ON is leading to or appearing in, table 5 shows that ON-social actor and ON-others are used in similar percentages (no significant difference) in the different types of macrostructural speech acts, and that they do not occur proportionally more in one type of speech act or the other (as evidenced by the comparison with the percentage of all positive, negative or neutral macrostructures).

	Mcr with ON / LM-actor		Mcr with ON / others		All Mcr	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
POS	33	27	19	17.6	220	25.2
NEG	80	65.6	78	72.2	554	63.5

⁶ ThMcr: sentence that is both a theme and a macrostructure.

⁷ TThMcr: sentence that is both a text theme and a text macrostructure.

⁸ either by appearing in the argumentation leading to them or directly in them.

NEU	9	7.4	11	10.2	98	11.2
Total	122	100	108	100	872	100

Table 5: Types of ON in positive, negative and neutral macrostructures

The final text macrostructure of the editorial is what gives it its general tendency. When it is positive, the purpose of the editorial is to encourage. On the contrary, when it is negative, the point is to criticize. It appears that the more often ON is used in an editorial, the most likely it will occur in connection with a negative macrostructure (table 5; ON-social actor: 65.6%; ON-others: 72.2%), and the most likely this editorial will have a final negative text macrostructure (table 6).

Furthermore, 83.2% of editorials with ON of any type have a final negative text macrostructure (table 6), and 82.8% of editorial with ON-social actor have a final negative text macrostructure (table 7). However, when one compares these results with the percentages of editorials with a positive or negative final macrostructure, it appears that proportionally, ON (of any type or ON-social actor) does not occur more in editorials with a final negative text macrostructure. In other words, ON (of any type or ON-social actor) is proportionally not used more often in generally negative editorials.

# of "ON" (any type)	Appearing in		Total	
	# of edit. with final TMcr NEG	# of edit. with final TMcr POS		
7	1 (analyzed below)	-	11	
6	2	-		
5	8	-		
4	11	1 (analyzed below)	12	90 89%
3	8	2	10	
2	27	4	31	
1	27	10	37	
Total	84 83.2%	17 16.8%	101 100%	
All editorials (with/without "ON")	119 78.6%	29 19.3%	150 100% (2 edit. with final TMcr NEU)	

Table 6: Editorials with any type of ON

# of "ON"/ LM- actor	Appearing in		Total (two editorials have a final neutral TMcr)		
	# of edit. with final TMcr NEG	# of edit. with final TMcr POS			
6	1 (analyzed below)	-	15		
4	6	1 (analyzed below)			
3	7	-	49 76.6%		
2	14	3			17
1	25	7			32
Total	53 82.8%	11 17.2%	64 100%		
All editorials	119	29	150		

(with/without “ON”)	78.6%	19.3%	100% (2 edit. with final TMcr NEU)
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Table 7: Editorials with ON-social actor

In summary, *ON* has been found to represent equally two preponderant functions, *Le Monde* as a social actor (51.5%) and others, i.e. excluding *Le Monde* (45.6%). The quantitative analysis of the place of *ON* in the argumentative hierarchical structure revealed that in absolute numbers *ON* is used significantly more often in relation to negative speech acts. However, relatively (i.e. in relation to the percentages of positive and negative speech acts), *ON* is not used significantly more or less in one case or the other. In comparison with the percentages of positive or negative editorials (according to their final text macrostructure), *ON* (whatever its function) does not occur significantly more often in positive or negative editorials. The use of *ON*-social actor and *ON* not including *Le Monde* is remarkably similar one vis-à-vis the other in terms of place in the text hierarchical structure and in terms of the type of macrostructure (speech act, positive or negative orientation) they lead to or are in. Furthermore, *ON* of either type has in general not been found to affect one type of speech act / macrostructure proportionally significantly more than another. This amounts to say that *Le Monde* does not purposely use *ON* to emphasize its numerous criticisms, but rather that it takes advantage of *ON*'s “power” whenever it feels the need to. In other words, *ON* functions as a general rhetorical tool. *ON* is not used with a specific purpose except in one case: *ON*-others (i.e. excluding *Le Monde*) affects proportionally more directives with a negative orientation. Thus, except for this last case, the power of *ON* does not come from the manner it is used by editorialists but can be said to be inherent to its “indefinite nature”.

3.2 *ON*'s indefiniteness: examples

The qualitative analysis of four editorials is given below to illustrate the power of *ON*'s indefiniteness. These editorials are those with the most occurrences of any type of *ON* with a final negative text macrostructure (“*Loi de la jungle en Guyane*”) and with a final positive text macrostructure (“*Leçon danoise*”), and the ones with the most occurrences of *ON*-social actor with a final negative text macrostructure (“*Le FMI et la Russie*”) and with a final positive text macrostructure (“*L’Europe du cinéma*”).

In “*Loi de la jungle en Guyane*” (Jungle rule in Guyana), published on 7 July 2001, the 7 instances of *ON* represent powerful lawless “others” whom *Le Monde* contrasts with the powerless (French) State before calling for a change in policy (in the final text macrostructure). The situation is firmly set in the first paragraph (sentences 1 to 11) that defines the text theme. In four consecutive sentences (2 to 5), the “others” are presented as operating lawlessly on the French Republic’ territory (sentence 1): “*on y tue, [on y] torture, [on y] massacre, on y mène des expéditions punitives*” (there, one kills, [one] tortures, [one] massacres, one leads punitive expeditions). Although this state of affairs has been going on for ten years (sentence 6) and the State knows about it (sentence 7), the State cannot and does not want to put an end to it (sentences 8 and 9). This takes place in Guyane (sentence 10) and *Le Monde*, as a news provider, publishes a report to denounce this situation (sentence 11 – text theme). Here, it is important to note that it is general knowledge that numerous cases of criminal activities take place on French

territory and always will whatever the French State does; what makes the situation different and worse in this editorial is the “indefiniteness” of the perpetrators, who are furthermore portrayed as actors (*ON* is always subject of a verb in the active voice). Thus, *Le Monde*’s builds a firm basis for its rightful behavior on the strong opposition it sets between a dangerous “*ON*”, made even more menacing by its “indefiniteness”, and the highest legal authority (i.e. the State) that cannot, and even does not want to do anything. This opposition between this powerful criminal “*ON*” and the powerless State is reinforced in the editorial’s argumentation with more examples of “*ON*” acting lawlessly and of the State doing nothing. A strong case having thus been established, *Le Monde* can shift from a personal position in the text theme (“*L’enquête que nous publions...*” [the report that we are publishing...]) to an impersonal position in the text macrostructure (“*il est temps de réviser une politique qui...*” [it is time to review a policy that...]) that provides a broader basis to its own standpoint. Thus, by its skillful use of *ON*, *Le Monde* has facilitated the shift from its role as a news provider (text theme) to that of an advice-giver (text macrostructure).

Of the four instances of *ON* in “*Leçon danoise*” (Danish lesson), published on 30 September 2000, one theoretically represents everybody (“*qu’on ose l’avouer ou non*” [whether one dares recognize it or not]), two represent “others” (i.e. some of the 11 members of the European Union who chose to adopt the Euro), and one represents a group of which *Le Monde* could be (and very probably is) part (“*même si l’on peut regretter le choix...*” [even if one may regret the choice...]). The first instance of *ON* (in “*qu’on ose l’avouer ou non*”), while logically embracing everybody, leads to a macrostructure talking about political elites, and thereby refers to the totality of these political elites. The purpose of this *ON* is thus to put together all members of the political elite without distinction whatever their positions on a particular point. The two instances of *ON* representing some members of the Union allow *Le Monde* to criticize their behaviour (“*les non-dits et autres ambiguïtés que l’on pratique*”, “*on n’y a pas suffisamment mesuré, ou publiquement avoué*” [“what one leaves unsaid or ambiguous”, “there, one has not sufficiently measured or publicly recognized”]) without naming them, thus not giving them a chance to defend themselves without at the same time recognizing their doings. Finally, the most ambiguous *ON* appearing in “*même si l’on peut regretter le choix...*” (even if one may regret this choice), when placed in its context and co-text, is quite revealing of *ON*’s strategical use. Indeed, *Le Monde* is in favour of the Euro. Thus, *Le Monde* is definitively part of this *ON* and does (in a way) regret the Danish choice to reject the Euro as expressed in a paragraph theme. However, starting the paragraph argumentation on a broad and indefinite basis with this *ON* allows *Le Monde* to finish it also on a large and general basis in the paragraph macrostructure: “*mieux vaut rester hors de l’euro plutôt que...*” (it is better to stay out of the Euro zone rather than...). The repeated use of *ON* whose indefiniteness permitted not to draw a clear line among members of the political elite, among members of the European Union, and between *Le Monde* and others helps *Le Monde* take a very nuanced position: while it has publicly taken position in favour of the Euro, it does neither criticize nor even really regret its rejection by the Danish population: “*ce n’est pas un drame*” (it is not a catastrophe) as it says in the editorial’s final text macrostructure.

“*Le FMI et la Russie*” (The IMF and Russia), published on 6 August 1999, contains 6 instances of *ON*, each representing LM-social actor, in its first six sentences. These sentences are part either of the first paragraph ending with the text theme or of the second paragraph ending

with the text macrostructure.⁹ The first three uses (in sentences 1 and 2) describe the state of knowledge of *Le Monde* and others on the relationship between Russia and the IMF: “*on croyait tout savoir*” (one thought one knew everything), “*on en savait sans doute encore moins encore qu’on ne le croyait ou le craignait*” (one probably knew even less than one believed or feared). This naive ignorance shared by *Le Monde* must be offset, and sentence 3 affirms that those who were “blissfully ignorant” are nonetheless able to decipher what a Pricewaterhouse-Coopers report says: “*on sait le décrypter*” (one knows how to decipher it). These first three sentences lead to the first paragraph’s macrostructure that functions as the text theme for the editorial and states how incriminating this report is for Russia as well as the IMF. The editorial’s argumentation is contained in the first two paragraphs. In the first, it started with “we were wrong”, and continued with “we are intelligent and we can learn”; in the second, it finishes with “this is what we have learned”: “*on y découvre*” (in it one discovers) (sentence 5), “*on y apprend*” (from it one learns) (sentence 6). This sixth sentence, the editorial’s text macrostructure, denounces the complicity of the IMF in the embezzlements of IMF funds by Russia. In this editorial, the use of a *ON* that includes *Le Monde* and others allows *Le Monde* to share the responsibility of having been wrong (and thus lessens its lack of perspicacity), to assert its abilities without appearing unduly immodest, and in concert with others to accuse the IMF and Russia. Because of the very specialized content of the Pricewaterhouse-Coopers report, there is not doubt that *Le Monde* is speaking in this editorial and not any citizen; the indefiniteness of *ON*, however, gives *Le Monde* a more powerful voice.

“*L’Europe du cinéma*” (Cinematographic Europe), published on 25 November 2000, celebrates the fact that the European Union attributed 400 million of Euros to the European audiovisual sector. Three of the four *ON*-social actor underline how the success of European cinema is visible: “*on le voit*” (one sees it) [text macrostructure], “*on le voit aussi*” (one sees it also) [text theme], “*on remarque*” (one notices) [text theme]. The last instance of *ON*-social actor notes how a Spanish film is easily recognized as a European success: “*on peut rattacher*” (one can put in this category). In this editorial, the indefiniteness of *ON* highlights how European films successfully cross national borders and thus underlines the importance of paying attention to European cinema.

While the quantitative analysis of the place of *ON* in the text argumentative hierarchical structure did not reveal any specific use of *ON*, the qualitative analysis of *ON* has underlined how *ON*’s indefiniteness exerts its power in combination with its place in the hierarchical structure.

4 *ON*: a powerful rhetorical tool

This article investigated the discursive function of *ON* in media discourse, more particularly in *Le Monde*’s editorials. The study was restricted to the analysis of *ON* within its co-text and did not take into consideration the socio-cultural context (that would have been necessary for the inquiry into *Le Monde*’s identity through its use of *ON*). Despite this limitation, the results of this study clearly outline the power of *ON*.

⁹ This editorial represents one of the not so common cases when the text macrostructure is not in the last paragraph.

First, *ON* as an ‘umbrella’ speaker was found to represent mainly and in a similar proportion “others” (i.e. excluding *Le Monde*) and *Le Monde* acting as a social actor (i.e. not in the traditional journalistic role of news provider). Second, a quantitative analysis of the place of *ON* in the text argumentation’s hierarchical structure showed that *ON* does not fulfill a specific function; rather, *Le Monde*’s editorialists use it as a general rhetorical tool whenever they need it. Third, a qualitative analysis of four editorials revealed how the indefiniteness of *ON* combined with its place in the argumentation’s hierarchical structure gives it power.

In conclusion, the danger and power of *ON*, the reason for prohibiting its use and the necessity behind its actual use hold in one word: its indefiniteness. Opting for indefiniteness may imply losing precision, whereas Nicolas Boileau’s *Art poétique* (1674) has taught generations of French children (and before them their teachers) to polish their work not once but twenty times in order to reach structure and accuracy in their writing. However, indefiniteness has also its advantages and this is why *ON* has always been and always will be used by the best writers. Indeed, *ON* can be used as an accomplice or as an opponent, whoever best suits the authors’ argumentation. *ON*’s indefiniteness can set a general tone of haziness and may facilitate the acceptance of nuances in the authors’ positions, and thus spare them from potential accusations of contradiction. *ON*’s indefiniteness can relieve authors of the burden of defining Others but still enable them to use these Others’ weight to emphasize an idea. This idea may be the authors’ personal voice when *ON* includes them, or it may be an idea that the authors are firmly against when *ON* represents Others. *ON*’s indefiniteness can be circumscribed by the location in which *ON* acts: it becomes precise enough so that one can fathom who is talked about, but it is still sufficiently fuzzy to remain mysterious and thereby becomes more illustrious or more dangerous. In the latter case, it allows authors to proffer accusations against individuals without giving them a fair chance to defend themselves; indeed, were they to do so, they would automatically recognize that they were the ones aimed at with *ON*. Under the pen of skilled writers, *ON* is a powerful rhetorical tool. Thus, for *Le Monde*’s editorialists, while precision is one of the newspaper’s two writing principles (Monde 2002: 48), *ON*’s use is not just unavoidable; it may very well seem essential.

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