


LES PRONOMS SUJETS ET NIVEAUX DE POLITESSE - (Subject pronouns & politeness levels)

Today, we are going to study subject pronouns and learn about politeness levels as they are connected with each other. If this lesson cannot be considered as difficult, you will still need to pay close attention as the French politeness level concept does not exist in English.

1) Subject pronouns

There are 6 subject pronouns in French. They have the same use as in English:

JE	I
TU	You (<i>informal- singular</i>)
IL	He (<i>male singular</i>)
ELLE	She (<i>female singular</i>)
ON	We (<i>informal- singular; often used in oral conversation</i>)
	
NOUS	We (<i>formal- plural; written form</i>)
VOUS	You (<i>formal- singular/plural</i>)
ILS	They (<i>male plural</i>)
ELLES	(<i>female plural</i>)



Some rules to be remembered:

- **Je** becomes **J'** when the verb to conjugate starts with a vowel:
ex: JE fais → J'aime
- **Tu** is used in the singular in informal situations. It is called *Le tutoiement*.
- **Vous** is used in formal situations and can address both a group of people or a single person that you must respect. In an informal context, it will be used to address a group of people only. When used in formal situations, it is called *Le vouvoiement*.
- **On** has the meaning of "we" in informal and oral situations. It can sometimes be translated by "it" in the passive form:
ex: -ON vous appelle demain → WE will call you tomorrow

-ON DIT des néo-zélandais qu'ils sont très chaleureux → New Zealanders ARE SAID TO BE very welcoming

- **Nous** has the same meaning as *on* but is used orally in formal situations and should always appear in professional or official written texts.
- **Ils** and **Elles** are the plural forms of **Il** and **Elle**, and in French, *they* is distinguished whether the subjects are male or female.

2) Politeness levels

As you may have seen with the pronouns hereinabove, the French language has 2 different ways of speaking. Depending on who you are talking to, the level of politeness and tone of the voice are going to change. French politeness levels are called *Le vouvoiement* and *Le tutoiement*.

- The *vouvoiement* is to be used when speaking formally to someone like your boss, people you're meeting for the first time, or older people. *Vouvoiement* ← *vous*.
- The *tutoiement*, on the contrary, should be used when talking to your friends and family, or between young people of the same age. *Tutoiement* ← *tu*.

Choosing which form to use is an unspoken conventional agreement between the 2 speakers. It is usually the environment that will decide which one to use. At work with your manager or colleagues, you will have to use the *vouvoiement* unless said otherwise by them. As a matter of fact, it is when talking to them, that they will tell you "*on peut se tutoyer*" and in some sorts, give you the permission to use the informal form. If they don't, and you feel rather close to them, then you can suggest it yourself. If not, you should continue to *vouvoyer* the person.

At school, a student should always *vouvoyer* his/her teachers; however most of the time, the teacher will *tutoyer* his/her students; likewise, a teacher will always *vouvoyer* students' parents and the principal of the school. It is a mark of respect and hierarchy.

If you are afraid of making a mistake and being disrespectful, the best is to use the polite form "vous". At least, you can never be wrong and will not offend the other speaker.

