

## On or l'on, un or l'un?

*On attend toujours l'un des conférenciers.*  
We are still waiting for one of the speakers.

### LESSON

#### What is it?

*On* is an impersonal subject pronoun and can refer to a person or people. *Un* can be an article, a number or an indefinite pronoun, i.e: it replaces a noun. This lesson will focus on *un* as indefinite pronoun.

#### What is it like in English?

In English, the pronoun *on* does not exist. It is an equivalent of "we", "you", "they", "people" or "someone". Note that the passive voice in English is often translated with *on* in French.

Shall we go to the pictures? → *On va au cinéma ?*

It is thought that this folio was written by Shakespeare.

→ *On pense que ce folio a été écrit par Shakespeare.*

*Un* is the equivalent of "one" in English:

One of my children works in Muscat. → *Un de mes enfants travaille à Muscat.*

The difference between *on/l'on*, *un/l'un* does not exist in English.

#### What is it like in French?

##### 1. At a beginning of a sentence, *l'* in *l'on* or *l'un* does not have any grammatical meaning and is not compulsory.

- a. *L'on* is rare and often used in a formal and written register rather than in spoken French. It can be perceived as a bit pedantic.

*L'on* dit qu'il ne viendra pas. → One says that he will not come.

- b. *L'un* is commonly used as it makes sentences sound better.

*L'un* des plus beaux villages que je connaisse est Gordes.

→ One of the most beautiful villages I know is Gordes.

Note that as a pronoun, *l'un* agrees with the noun it represents (*l'une*, *les uns*, *les unes*).

*L'une* des plus belles fleurs est la rose. → One of the most beautiful flowers is the rose.

*Les uns/unes* pleuraient, les autres riaient. → Some were crying, others were laughing.

##### 2. *L'* is recommended for euphonic reasons.

- a. When a word ends in a vowel and the one following it starts with a vowel, it is difficult to pronounce it and maintain the flow. Hence, the use of *l'* to smooth things out and keep the rhythm of the sentence. It is not compulsory however even if strongly recommended.

*Il faut que l'on parte.* → We need to go.

*Il faut qu'on parte* is also perfectly correct but slightly less harmonious to the ear.

**Watch out!** You tend not to use *l'on* if the next word starts with an "l" as it would be too many "l" sounds in a row. Instead of saying *Il faut que l'on lise ce livre*, you will say: *Il faut qu'on lise ce livre*.

- b. Note some common expressions with *l'un*:

*l'un l'autre* → each other

*ni l'un ni l'autre* → neither one nor the other

*l'un et l'autre* → both of them

*soit l'un soit l'autre* → either one or the other

EXERCISES

1 Fill in the gaps with *on*, *l'on*, *un* or *l'un*, giving all the possibilities. Make all necessary changes.

- a. J'espère [que] ..... ira bientôt en vacances.
- b. .... préfèrent le thé, les autres le café.
- c. Elle n'a pas compris ce [que] ..... lui a dit.
- d. C'est l'argent dont ..... a besoin.
- e. .... des voitures est mal garée.
- f. Vous ne savez pas de quoi ..... parle.
- g. Il refuse [que] ..... lise à haute voix.
- h. Vous voulez être ..... de nos représentants ?

2 Translate the following sentences into French using *(l')on* or *(l')un*.

- a. Neither one nor the other came.  
→ .....
- b. I was given this opportunity.  
→ .....
- c. With my friend, we went out last night.  
→ .....
- d. You have one of those new electric cars.  
→ .....
- e. The door was left open.  
→ .....
- f. Both of them want to come.  
→ .....
- g. Some will win some will lose.  
→ .....
- h. What have we done?  
→ .....
- i. One of your parcels has arrived.  
→ .....
- j. It is said that the president has resigned.  
→ .....

3 Describe one custom or usage in your country using *on*, *l'un*, *l'autre*, etc.

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