

# Constraints on subject-focus mapping in French and English

## A contrastive analysis

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Grammars reflect universal constraints on the mappings between the information structure of propositions and the formal structure of sentences. These constraints restrict the possible linkings between pragmatic relations (topic vs. focus), pragmatic properties (given vs. new), semantic roles (agent vs. patient), grammatical relations (subject vs. object), and syntactic positions (preverbal vs. postverbal, etc). While these mapping constraints are universal, their grammatical manifestation is subject to typological variation. For example, although spoken English has been shown to strongly prefer pronominal over lexical subjects, hence to avoid focal subjects, it nevertheless freely permits subject-focus mapping in certain sentence-focus and argument-focus constructions. In spoken French, in contrast, subject-focus mapping is unacceptable if not ungrammatical in most environments. Spoken French shows a near one-to-one mapping between focus structure and phrase structure: Topic expressions occur overwhelmingly in preverbal position and in pronominal form, while focus expressions occur postverbally. To avoid violating this near one-to-one mapping constraint, spoken French makes abundant use of grammatical realignment constructions, especially clefts. Some of these constructions do not exist in English, or have a much more restricted distribution in that language.

### 1. Focus structure across languages: Some examples

It is well-known that the lexico-grammatical structure of sentences reflects different types of focus-background articulation, or focus structure, depending on the scope of the focus in a proposition. At least three focus structure categories are formally reflected across languages (Lambrecht 1994: 221ff.).

The first is the predicate focus articulation, also referred to as the ‘subject-predicate’, ‘topic-comment’, or ‘categorical’ articulation. This focus category is characterized by the fact that the pragmatic assertion made by an utterance provides a comment about a given topic. Alternatively, one could say that the

assertion consists in adding a predicate to a given argument. Example (1) illustrates the predicate-focus type in five familiar European languages, provided with a minimal discourse context (small caps indicate points of prosodic prominence):

- (1) Context: "What happened to *your car*?"
- |    |         |   |                |
|----|---------|---|----------------|
| a. | English | My <small>CAR</small> broke <small>DOWN</small> ./It broke <small>DOWN</small> .                  | (SV)           |
| b. | German  | Mein <small>AUTO</small> ist <small>KAPUTT</small> ./Das ist <small>KAPUTT</small> .              | (SV)           |
| c. | Spanish | Mi <small>COCHE</small> se <small>DESCOMPUSO</small> ./Se <small>DESCOMPUSO</small> .             | (SV/V)         |
| d. | Italian | La mia <small>MACCHINA</small> si è <small>ROTTA</small> ./Si è <small>ROTTA</small> .            | (SV/V)         |
| e. | French  | Ma <small>VOITURE</small> (elle) est en <small>PANNE</small> ./Elle est en <small>PANNE</small> . | (S(pro)V/proV) |

There is remarkable syntactic and prosodic similarity in the way the different languages express this focus type, at least in the given discourse context. In all cases the initial subject expresses the topic of the sentence, about which the following predicate expresses a comment. In the given context, the subject can be either lexical or pronominal, or it can be null-instantiated, as in Spanish and Italian. In spoken French, there is a clear preference for the topic NP to be left-dislocated (hence not to be the subject). Prosodically, the common feature is the presence of a nuclear accent at the end of the sentence and of a secondary accent on the subject or topic NP, when it is lexical.

The second type of focus structure is the argument focus articulation, also called 'focus-presupposition', 'specificational', 'identificational', or 'contrastive' articulation.<sup>1</sup> Here the pragmatic assertion consists in providing the missing argument in a pragmatically presupposed open proposition. In other words, the assertion adds an argument to a given (incomplete) predication:

- (2) Context: "I heard your motorcycle broke down?"
- |    |         |  |              |
|----|---------|--|--------------|
| a. | English | No, my <small>CAR</small> broke down.                  | (SV)         |
| b. | German  | Nein, mein <small>AUTO</small> ist kaputt.             | (SV)         |
| c. | Spanish | No, se me descompuso el <small>COCHE</small> .         | (VS)         |
| d. | Italian | No, si è rotta la mia <small>MACCHINA</small> .        | (VS)         |
| e. | French  | Non, c'est ma <small>VOITURE</small> qui est en panne. | (proVO+proV) |

It is easy to see that in the case of the argument-focus articulation there is much greater syntactic and prosodic diversity among the different languages than in the predicate-focus type in (1). In English and German, the syntax of the sentence is the same as in (1), but the nuclear accent is now on the subject instead of the

1. The label 'argument focus' is somewhat misleading as the term 'argument' is now almost exclusively used to denote a complement that is required by some predicator. In the present, somewhat old-fashioned, use 'argument' includes 'adjunct'.

predicate, the latter being necessarily deaccented. In Spanish and Italian it is the sequential order of the subject and the predicate that is reversed, resulting in a case of syntactic inversion. This reversal of the two main constituents reflects the fact that it is now the subject that represents the new or focal portion of the proposition, while the predicate is now pragmatically presupposed. In both languages, the verb could receive a secondary sentence accent. Such an accent is not categorial and is therefore ignored here. Finally in French the argument-focus articulation is expressed via a type of cleft construction (the *c'est*-cleft, which formally corresponds to the English *it*-cleft). Notice that cleft formation results in postverbal position of the focal argument while keeping the logical subject-predicate sequence unchanged.

The third type of focus structure is the sentence focus articulation, also referred to as the 'all-new', 'presentational', or 'thetic' type. In this type, the proposition lacks a bipartition into either topic and comment or presupposition and focus, the basic pragmatic function being to introduce a new entity or a new situation (involving a new entity) into the discourse. In other words, the pragmatic assertion consists in adding both an argument and a predicate to the discourse:

- (3) Context: "You look upset. What happened?"
- |    |         |                                   |              |
|----|---------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| a. | English | My CAR broke down.                | (SV)         |
| b. | German  | Mein AUTO ist kaputt.             | (SV)         |
| c. | Spanish | Se me DESCOMPUSO el COCHE.        | (proVS)      |
| d. | Italian | Mi si è ROTTA la MACCHINA.        | (proVS)      |
| e. | French  | J'ai ma VOITURE qui est en PANNE. | (proVO+proV) |

Interestingly, in all five languages the sentence-focus articulation in (3) is formally identical, or near-identical, to the corresponding argument-focus articulation in (2). In English and German, the two main constituents are now prosodically integrated via focus projection (Jacobs 1993), the accented subject argument projecting its focus value onto the unaccented predicate. In Spanish and Italian, subject-predicate inversion is used, with the main accent falling on the sentence-final subject. A secondary accent falls on the verb, indicating the focal character of its denotatum. In French, another cleft construction is used, this time involving the copular verb *avoir* 'to have' instead of *être* 'to be'.

## 2. Constraints on the mapping from information structure to grammatical form

Grammars reflect universal cognitive constraints on the mapping between the informational structuring of utterances, the semantic structuring of propositions,

and the formal structuring of sentences. These constraints restrict the possible alignments among the following pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic parameters:

- (4) a. pragmatic relations (topic and focus)
- b. pragmatic statuses of discourse referents (hearer-new vs. hearer-old, discourse-new vs. discourse-old (Prince 1992))
- c. semantic roles (agent and patient)
- d. grammatical relations (subject and object)
- e. syntactic positions (e.g. preverbal vs. postverbal position in SVO languages)
- f. morphosyntactic and prosodic forms

One cross-linguistically well-attested example of a mapping constraint is the constraint that determines the possible alignments between subject, focus, hearer-new discourse status, and sentence-initial subject position. A manifestation of this constraint is shown in the *there*-construction in (5), where a focal subject NP with a hearer-new referent and a stative predicate cannot occur in preverbal subject position and must occur instead in the postverbal position normally occupied by objects:

- (5) a. #A guy was very rich.  
      >There was a guy who was very rich.
- b. #Un type était très riche.  
      >Il y a avait un type qui était très riche.

The mapping constraint illustrated in (5) is the manifestation of a general cognitive principle according to which one cannot assess the information value (the “truth value”) of a proposition unless one has first identified the subject relative to which the speaker intends the predicate to be assessed (cf. the ‘principle of the separation of reference and relation’ in Lambrecht 1994).

A related mapping constraint has been observed for certain partitive subjects in French (Van de Velde 1995). As Van de Velde observes, sentences like (6a) are judged ungrammatical or unacceptable by native speakers of French, even though they are syntactically unobjectionable:

- (6) a. \*De la neige a effacé leur traces.
- b. Snow erased their traces.

It is interesting to observe that the corresponding English sentence in (6b) does not give the same impression of unacceptability. As we will see in much detail below, there is a marked typological difference between English and French with respect to the tolerance for subjects with pragmatically inaccessible referents.

English has a number of (more or less sub-standard) grammatical constructions which allow speakers to prevent subject NPs with pragmatically inaccessible referents from occurring in sentence-initial position. Some examples are shown in (7), (8), and (9), each followed by the corresponding canonical version which was felt to be pragmatically inappropriate by the speaker in the given discourse context:

- (7) Student after a logic exam:
- a. I got proofs dancing in my head.
  - b. Proofs are dancing in my head.
- (8) UT professor in a discussion with colleagues about teaching loads (Lambrecht 1988b):
- a. I have a friend of mine in the history department teaches two courses per semester.
  - b. A friend of mine in the history department teaches two courses per semester.
- (9) Hostess to guest after spilling jam on a new tablecloth:
- a. We don't last long with tablecloths in this house.
  - b. Tablecloths don't last long in this house.

In (7a), the speaker avoids the lexical subject NP *proofs* whose referent is hearer-new by resorting to a cleft-like structure headed by the verb *get*. In this structure the logical predicate (*are dancing in my head*) is demoted to secondary predicate status (*dancing in my head*), allowing the logical subject (*proofs*) to appear in object position and the main subject position to be filled by the highly accessible deictic pronoun *I*. Example (8a) is an instance of the 'presentational amalgam construction' (Lambrecht 1988b), in which a NP with a pragmatically inaccessible referent (here *a friend of mine in the history department*) functions simultaneously as the object of the presentational verb *have* and as the subject of the following main predicate, in such a way that the initial subject position can be filled by the deictic pronoun *I*. (9a) is an instance of a somewhat less conventionalized construction, in which the logical subject argument (*tablecloths*) is demoted to postverbal oblique status (*with tablecloths*), thereby allowing the initial subject position to be occupied by the deictic *we*.

While the cognitive constraints operating in (5) through (9) are universal, their grammatical manifestation in individual languages is subject to typological variation (Comrie 1981; Lambrecht 1994; Van Valin & LaPolla 1997; Van Valin 1999). Thus, even though English strongly favors pronominal over lexical subjects in spontaneous discourse (Prince 1981, Francis, Gregory & Michaelis 1999), it

nevertheless freely permits focal lexical subjects in sentence-initial position, as shown in (2a) and (3a) above.

In contrast to English, many languages avoid or prohibit sentence structures with focal subject referents and use special realignment constructions (clefts, inversions, diatheses) instead. One such language is the Bantu language Sesotho, as described by Demuth (1989) (see also Zerbian (2006) on Northern Sotho and Creissels (2008) on Tswana). Consider the following contrasts:

- (10) a. *Monna o-fihl-il-e*  
 man SUBJ-arrive-PRFV-MOOD  
 'The man arrived' (not 'A man arrived')
- b. *Ho-fihl-il-e monna*  
 LOC-arrive-PRFV-MOOD man  
 'There arrived a man/A MAN arrived'

As shown in (10a), in Sesotho an initial subject NP cannot have a hearer-new referent, witness the fact that in the English translation the subject cannot be an indefinite NP. To express the sentence corresponding to the English *A MAN arrived* (a sentence-focus structure), the subject NP with the hearer-new referent must appear post-verbally, the preverbal position now being occupied by a locative expression (comparable to the English *there*-construction *There arrived a man*).

Of special interest with respect to the French facts described below are the data in (11) and (12), which concern the syntactic behavior of interrogative subjects:

- (11) a. \**Mang o-pheh-ile lijo?*  
 who SUB-COOK-PERF food  
 'Who cooked the food?'
- b. *Lijo li-pheh-li-o-e ke mang?*  
 food SUBJ-COOK-PERF-PASS-MOOD COP who  
 'The food was cooked by who?/Who cooked the food?'

In (11a) the interrogative subject *mang* 'who', being an argument-focus expression, is disallowed in initial position. Instead it appears in postverbal position, via passivization, as shown in (11b). An analogous situation obtains in (12):

- (12) a. *Ea o-f-ile-ng ntja ke mang?*  
 REL OBJ-give-PERF-REL dog COP who  
 'The one that gave you the dog is who?/Who gave you the dog?'
- b. *Ke mang ea o-f-ile-ng ntja*  
 COP who REL OBJ-give-PERF-REL dog  
 'It's who that gave you the dog?/Who gave you the dog?'

In (12), the interrogative subject *mang* ‘who’ is prevented from appearing in initial position through the use of cleft constructions. (12a) corresponds to the English WH-cleft and (12b) to the English *it*-cleft. As we will see later on, a very similar situation obtains in spoken French WH-question formation.

### 3. Mapping constraints and preferred clause structure in spoken French

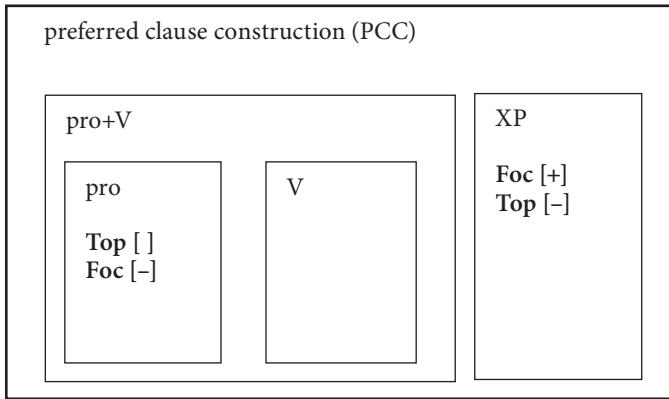
With respect to the constraints on the mapping from information structure to grammatical form, spoken French is typologically closer to a language like Sesotho than to English or German. In particular, spoken French is subject to the constraints in (13):

- (13) a. Focal elements do not occur in preverbal position.  
 b. Topical elements rarely occur in postverbal position.  
 c. Preverbal elements must be pragmatically highly accessible.

By ‘preverbal position’ I mean the position normally occupied either by lexical subjects or by clitic pronouns. By ‘postverbal position’ I mean the position normally occupied by lexical objects. The constraints do not apply to the pre-clausal COMP position (as in focus-preposing constructions) nor to the left- or right-dislocated topic positions. As a corollary of (13b) and (13c), topical constituents occur overwhelmingly in the form of clitic pronouns or else in dislocated (i.e. non-argument) position. It is important to acknowledge that these mapping constraints are not the automatic result of general processing constraints on spoken language production, i.e. they are not simple ‘discourse preferences’. Rather I will show that they are properties of the grammatical system of the language, with strong correlates in syntactic form.

Analyses of corpora of spoken French reveal an overwhelming preference for speakers to use a certain sentence type which I call the ‘preferred clause construction’ (PCC). In this preferred construction, the preverbal position is occupied by a clitic pronoun and the postverbal position by an XP (typically a single one) with focus value. The PCC is instantiated in 95 to 97% of all clauses in the corpora I have analyzed. The canonical SVO clause construction, in which the clause-initial subject position is occupied by a full lexical NP, is distributionally highly marked in spoken French (Lambrecht 1987).

The basic syntactic structure and information structure of the PCC is represented in the box diagram in (14).

(14) *The preferred clause construction of spoken French*

(pro = clitic pronoun, XP = lexical or independent pronominal argument or adjunct)

Pragmatically, the PCC is of the predicate-focus type (cf. Example (1)), i.e. the PCC normally expresses a proposition in which the initial pro element is interpreted as having the pragmatic role of topic, about which the focal predicate expresses a comment. In accordance with the constraints in (13), the clause-initial pro element is non-focal and its referent is highly discourse-accessible (hence coded pronominally). In case pro is the so-called ‘impersonal’ *il* ‘it’ or the generic *on* ‘one’, it is neither focal nor topical, hence the empty brackets after the ‘Top’ attribute. The postverbal XP element is focal. The verb is unmarked for the topic-focus opposition, due to the optional nature of focus projection (Schmerling 1976; Fuchs 1976; Höhle 1982; Selkirk 1984; Jacobs 1993).

In order to preserve the PCC as invariably as possible in discourse, spoken French uses a number of ready-made grammatical constructions which “target” the PCC, i.e. whose sole purpose seems to be to permit speakers to rearrange constituents according to the communicative needs of the discourse without violating the constraints in (13) on the position and morphological type of topic and focus elements. These ‘PCC-targeted constructions’ fall into three major syntactic types:

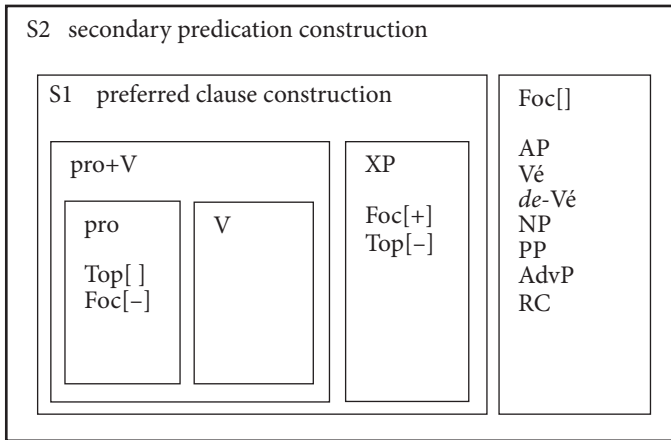
- (15) a. dislocation constructions  
 b. secondary predication constructions  
 c. inversion constructions (rare in spoken French)

The speaker’s selection among the construction types in (15) is determined by the focus articulation of the proposition to be communicated. Generally speaking, dislocation is used for predicate-focus, while secondary predication (and inversion) is used for argument-focus and sentence-focus. The PCC-targeted constructions can to some extent be combined with one another via constructional inheritance. In this paper, I will be concerned only with the secondary predication type (15b).



The box diagram in (16) shows the PCC embedded in a larger sentence structure, the secondary predication construction (labelled S2). This construction permits the generation of clefts and other PCC-targeted constructions (Vé = past participle; RC = relative clause).

(16) *Syntax and information structure of the secondary predication construction*



In the secondary predication construction, the postverbal XP of the PCC in (14) plays two grammatical roles simultaneously: it is both the grammatical object of a primary predication (the one expressed by the PCC) and the logical subject of a secondary predication, expressed by the rightmost box in (16) (Lambrecht 1997, 2000; Koenig & Lambrecht 1998). When the secondary predicate is a relative clause (RC), these constructions are often clefts, depending on the nature of the PCC predicate (Katz 1997; Lambrecht, 1988a, 2001). The use of some of the other categories in the rightmost box will be illustrated in Section 4.

In the remainder of this paper I will discuss various secondary predication constructions with attested examples from spontaneous conversational speech. The majority of the examples will illustrate cleft constructions. In each case, the French construction will be contrasted with the corresponding construction in English, or vice-versa.

#### 4. Secondary predication constructions

##### 4.1 Argument-focus constructions

As stated at the beginning, the basic discourse function of an argument-focus construction is to provide the missing element (argument or adjunct) in a pragmatically presupposed open proposition. Argument-focus constructions are often,

but by no means exclusively, used in replies to WH-questions. In the examples to be discussed, the focus argument is in square brackets and the sign # indicates discourse inappropriateness.

Consider the short exchange in (17) (Isabelle is speaker B's daughter):

- (17) A: J'aime bien ta chemise, tu te souviens où tu l'as achetée?  
 'I like your shirt, do you remember where you bought it?'  
 B: a. C'est [ISABELLE] qui me l'a DONNÉE, il y a cinq ans.  
 a'. #[Isabelle] me l'a donnée, il y a cinq ans.  
 b. [ISABELLE] GAVE it to me, five years ago.  
 b'. #It's [Isabelle] that gave it to me, five years ago.

Speaker B's reply is a striking example of the pervasive use of the *c'est*-cleft construction in the spoken language. The canonical SVO structure in (17Ba') would be inappropriate in the given context. This is so because speaker A's question 'Do you remember where you bought it?' has evoked the open proposition 'You bought it somewhere', as well as the desire to know the identity of the place in question. The place of provenance of the shirt will therefore be the argument-focus element of the answer. However since the shirt was in fact not a purchase by speaker B but a gift from his daughter, the gift-giver, not a store, will occupy the argument-focus position in the answer. Now since unpredictably the predicate associated with the focus element is *donner* 'give', not *acheter* 'buy', this unpredictability must be expressed by prosodic prominence on the verb in the RC (Lambrecht 1994). Notice that the predicate 'buy', when associated with a goal argument, belongs to the same semantic 'giving' frame as the verb *give*. Therefore the open proposition 'x gave it to me' is cognitively sufficiently accessible to warrant the use of the *c'est*-cleft construction (see Prince 1978).

In strong contrast to French, an *it*-cleft construction would be clearly inappropriate in English in (17). Instead, English uses the canonical SVO syntax. Notice, however, that the sentence is prosodically marked as not having the unmarked predicate-focus or topic-comment articulation. Indeed, the sentence accent on the subject NP *Isabelle* is an instance of the so-called 'A-accent' (Bolinger 1989) or primary accent (Ladd 1996: 223ff.) involving a falling intonation contour (marked 'H\*L' in the system of Pierrehumbert 1980). The referent of the subject NP is thus formally marked as having not a topic but a focus relation to the proposition.<sup>2</sup>

Example (17) allows us to draw two tentative conclusions. The first is that the appropriateness conditions for the use of the cleft construction in question are not

2. In calling the accent on *Isabelle* 'primary' or 'A-accent' I am leaving open the question of the nature of the second sentence accent, on *gave*. I assume this is also a primary accent, even though pragmatically it does not necessarily mark a focus element.

identical in French and in English, even though there may be usage overlap in other discourse situations. The second is that it is possible in English to simply reverse the unmarked topic-comment or theme-rheme word order without concomitant syntactic adjustments, while this is not possible in French. Notice, however, that the sequential order of the logical subject (here *Isabelle*) and the logical predicate (here *me la donnée/gave it to me*) remains the same in the two languages: in both languages the focal argument precedes the presupposed predicate.

Item (18) contains an attested English exchange. Speaker B has visited speaker A and is now planning his return home. Speaker A has offered to drive B to the airport, but B says he wants to take a cab instead:

- (18) A: The taxi is very expensive.  
 B: a. Doesn't matter. [COMPANY] PAYS.  
 a'. ?It's [the company] that pays.  
 b. Ça fait rien. C'est [la BOITE] qui PAYE.  
 b'. #[La boîte] paye.

As B's reply shows, it is possible, and in fact quite idiomatic, in English to use the unmarked syntactic sequence SV, even though in the given discourse situation the predicate *pays* is clearly less focal than the subject *company*. Indeed, the semantic 'paying' frame has been evoked in speaker A's utterance, while the company in question is entirely new to the discourse, hence acts as the focus of the proposition. As a result, the subject NP *company* receives the focus-marking A-accent, as in the previous example. By contrast, such a simple reversal of the topic-focus order is unacceptable in French and a *c'est*-cleft construction would have to be used, as shown in (18Bb). Nevertheless the sequential order of the logical subject and the logical predicate is again the same in the two languages. What counts is that in French this subject is prevented from appearing in initial subject position.

A similar situation obtains in (19). The utterance in (19a) was made in a restaurant, in reply to another speaker's question as to which item to choose from the wine list:

- (19) a. I really don't care. [YOU] DECIDE.  
 a'. I really don't care. ?It's [YOU] that decides.  
 b. Ça m'est vraiment égal. C'est [VOUS] qui DECIDEZ.  
 b'. Ça m'est vraiment égal. #[Vous] décidez.

As in the previous examples, the theme-rheme order is simply reversed in English, without further syntactic adjustments. In the given speech situation, the fact that a decision has to be made about which wine to choose is pragmatically presupposed. The identity of the chooser is the new, focal element. Nevertheless, the focus appears in initial subject position and the presupposed portion is expressed

in the following predicate. In French, the use of the canonical subject-predicate order would be unacceptable, as shown in (18), and a *c'est*-cleft construction would have to be used instead.

Item (20a) is another attested French example. The context is a guided tour of a French factory. The foreman explains the special situation of a certain group of workers by saying that they are temporary employees being trained by the factory at the expense of the government:

- (20) a. Autrement dit, ils travaillent pour nous, mais c'est [le GOUVERNEMENT] qui PAIE.  
 a'. #Autrement dit, ils travaillent pour nous, mais [le gouvernement] paie.  
 b. In other words, they work for us, but [the GOVERNMENT] PAYS.  
 b'. In other words, they work for us, but it's [the GOVERNMENT] that PAYS.

The semantic structure of the utterance in (20a) contains a contrast between two parallel predications, 'working for us' and 'being paid by the government'. Indeed in a language like Italian, the syntactic sequence would directly express the semantic theme-rheme parallelism between the two predications, via subject-verb inversion in the second pair. The analogous Italian sentence is shown in (20c)

- (20) c. LAVORANO per NOI, ma PAGA [il GOVERNO].

which literally translates as '(They) work for us but pays the government'. Neither French nor English can express the theme-rheme sequence in the same exact parallel as in Italian (unless they were to resort to a passive construction in the second pair, such as 'They work for us, but they are paid by the government'). Instead both languages resort to the chiasmic structure A – B, B – A, where the theme-rheme sequence is reversed in the second pair. However, the chiasmus is expressed with different syntactic structures in the two languages. While English uses the canonical subject-predicate sequence twice, French resorts to a *c'est*-cleft construction in the second pair.

The next example shows an interesting subtle mistake made by an American student writing in French. In (21a), the actually produced sentence, the student describes how as a little girl she once got lost walking along a beach and how a life guard helped her find her way back to her parents:

- (21) a. #Finalement, j'ai trouvé un gardien (ou plutôt, [le GARDIEN] m'a trouvée).  
 a'. Finalement, j'ai trouvé un gardien (ou plutôt, c'est [le gardien] qui m'a trouvée).  
 b. Eventually I found a guard (or rather, [the GUARD] found ME).  
 b'. Eventually I found a guard (or rather it's the GUARD that found ME).

As the comparison of the inappropriate (21a) with (21b) reveals, the student spontaneously uses in French the canonical syntax she would have used in her

native English, producing something resembling the chiasmic structure ABC – CBA ('I find guard – guard find me'). This simple and elegant chiasmic structure is utterly unacceptable in the French version, where the focal item *le gardien* has to appear as a clefted NP (*c'est le gardien*).

Interestingly, the appropriate French version in (21a') fails to express a contrast that is obligatorily expressed in English, via the second accent on *me*. What is overtly expressed in English is to be inferred in French. This difference between overt vs. covert expression of a secondary contrast is nicely illustrated in the following text from a newspaper article about the difference in politeness between English and French people (the italics are in the English original):

- (22) a. The American travel writer Paul Theroux once defined an Englishman as someone who apologizes if *you* tread on *his* foot. To extend the analogy, a Frenchman could be defined as someone who expects you to apologize if *he* treads on *your* foot.
- b. L'écrivain voyageur américain Paul Theroux a défini un Anglais comme quelqu'un qui s'excuse si *vous* lui marchez sur le pied. Pour poursuivre l'analogie, un Français pourrait se définir comme quelqu'un qui s'attend à ce que vous vous excusiez si c'est lui qui vous marche sur le pied.

The stylistic effect of the English text is built on the parallel between two pairs of contrasting items: "*you* tread on *his* foot" and "*he* treads on *your* foot". At the time the first pair is uttered, the fact that someone treads on someone's foot is new to the discourse, while in the second pair this open proposition is now discourse-presupposed. This difference in presupposition remains formally unexpressed in English. What is elegantly expressed is the double contrast between agent and patient in the two pairs. In French, on the other hand, the discourse-presupposedness of the open proposition 'x treads on y's foot' is formally expressed in the second pair via the relative clause of the *c'est*-cleft construction. What remains unexpressed in French is the contrast between agent and patient. In both pairs, the patient argument is simply expressed by an unaccented pronoun (*lui* and *vous*).

Item (23) illustrates a little-known construction where the secondary predicate represented in (16) is not a relative clause (RC) but a noun phrase (NP). Sentence (23a), from a comic book by the French cartoonist Reiser, is uttered by a rat sitting comfortably next to a garbage can in a Paris street. Tasting different pieces of newspaper from the garbage can, the rat says:

- (23) a. C'est [*Le MONDE*] le MEILLEUR.  
 a'. #[*Le Monde*] est le meilleur.  
 b. [*Le MONDE*] is the BEST.  
 b'. \*It's [*le Monde*] the best.

The use of the structure in (23a) has the effect of avoiding the canonical structure in (23a'), which would be appropriate in a context where the newspaper *Le Monde* is already a topic under discussion, about which the predicate *est le meilleur* would express a comment. However in (23a), the newspaper in question is the focus of the proposition. What is pragmatically presupposed, given the context of the picture, is the fact that what one eats can taste more or less good. In English, as before, the focus element appears in the canonical subject position, followed by the presupposed predicate, reversing the normal theme-rheme order without concomitant syntactic changes. The structure in (23b'), which is analogous to the French structure in (23a), is ungrammatical in English.

(24) is another instance of the secondary predication construction in (23). The speaker is the driver of a car waiting at a red light behind three other cars. Deciding to pass the other cars as soon as the light turns green, the speaker utters (24a):

- (24) a. I'sont trois, c'est [MOI] le QUATRIEME.  
 a'. #I'sont trois, [je] suis le quatrième.  
 b. They are three, [I]'m the FOURTH.  
 b'. \*They are three, it is [me] the fourth.

As in the previous example, the pragmatically presupposed open proposition ('x is the fourth') is expressed in predicate position, while the focal subject (the value of the variable x) precedes. From the mention of the three other drivers in the first part of the sentence one can infer that some other driver will be number four. What is relatively new, or presented as such, is the fact that the fourth one is the speaker. The speaker will therefore be the focus of the proposition. This focus appears in subject position in English. In French it appears as the complement of the verb *est*, the presupposed predicate (*le quatrième*) being expressed in secondary predicate position.

From the constraint in (13a) ('Focal elements do not occur in preverbal position') it follows naturally that French does not have the category of the reverse WH-cleft, in which an argument focus appears in sentence-initial subject position. An example of the English reverse WH-cleft is shown in (25a).

- (25) a. [CHAMPAGNE] is what I like.  
 b. C'est [le champagne] que j'aime.  
 b'. #[Le champagne] est ce que j'aime.

As (25b') shows, the literal translation of the English cleft is unacceptable (if not ungrammatical) in French and a *c'est*-cleft has to be used instead, as in (25b).<sup>3</sup>

3. Note that Example (25b'), especially with left-dislocation (*Le champagne, c'est ce que j'aime*), would be acceptable in the non-cleft reading, where *le champagne* is a topic expression.

An attested English example of a reverse WH-cleft is shown in (26a) (from a conversation about Nancy Reagan's influence on her husband):

- (26) a. [SHE] was the one who wanted to keep Reagan from appearing anywhere in public.  
 b. C'était [elle] qui voulait empêcher Reagan d'apparaître en public.  
 b'. #[Elle] était celle qui voulait empêcher Reagan d'apparaître en public.

As in (25), the only possible cleft construction in this context in French is the *c'est*-cleft in (26b). Sentence (26b') is well-formed only in the reading where *elle* is a topic expression, as e.g. in response to the question 'Who was Nancy Reagan.' Another attested Example is (27a), from a TV interview with Nelson Mandela, in which the statesman was asked to explain how he met his second wife. After describing the circumstances that led to the marriage, Mandela ended with these words:

- (27) a. [THAT]'s how I MET her.<sup>4</sup>  
 b. C'est [comme ça] que j'ai fait sa connaissance.  
 c. \*[Comme ça] est que j'ai fait sa connaissance.

Even though the speaker has been talking about how he met his wife, the focus in (27a) is that element of the utterance which corresponds to the question word 'how?' in the original question, while the fact that the speaker met his wife at some point is treated as presupposed. In French the focus element *comme ça* 'that way' cannot appear in preverbal position, as (27c) shows, and a *c'est*-cleft must be used instead.

A revealing test case for the general claim made in this paper is the behavior of focus-sensitive adverbs like 'only'. French has two expressions for 'only': *seulement* and *(ne)...que*. As predicted, neither expression can occur in preverbal subject position in French:

- (28) a. Only [HE] understands me.  
 b. Y a que [LUI] qui me comprend.  
 b'. \*[LUI] seulement me comprend./\*Que [LUI] me comprend.<sup>5</sup>

4. In an interesting analysis, Calude (2008) argues that the construction illustrated in (27a) does not belong to the category Reverse WH-cleft but to a special category she refers to as 'Demonstrative cleft'. For the purpose of the present paper, the exact categorization of the construction is irrelevant, as long as the initial cleft constituent is a focus element.

5. The ungrammaticality of this sentence, as well as that of the corresponding sentence in (29b'), is independently motivated by the fact that the *que* in *(ne)...que* can only appear postverbally, hence is banned from initial position.

While in English the focus element *he* is the subject, in French the focus pronoun *lui* must appear in the post-copular position of the *avoir*-cleft construction in (28b), of which a first example was given in (3e) above. Another Example is shown in (29):

- (29) a. Only [MY PARENTS] call me that.  
 b. Y a que [mes parents] qui m'appellent comme ça.  
 b'. \*[MES PARENTS] seulement m'appellent comme ça.  
 /\*Que [MES PARENTS] m'appellent comme ça.

As in (28), the focus constituent appears in initial subject position in English, while in French it must occur in the postverbal focus position of an *avoir*-cleft.

Another revealing test case for the constraint in (13a) is the behavior of interrogative subjects in WH-questions in spoken French (see Myers 2007). As Myers and other researchers have shown, spoken French has a baffling variety of interrogative WH-constructions, whose existence seems to be at least in part motivated by the constraint in (13a). Consider the data in (30), some of which are strongly reminiscent of the Sesotho data in (11) and (12) above:

- (30) a. [Who] gave you the dog?  
 b. [Qui] t'a donné le chien?  
 c. [Qui] est-ce qui t'a donné le chien?  
 d. [Qui] c'est qui t'a donné le chien?  
 e. C'est [qui] qui t'a donné le chien?  
 f. [Qui] qui t'a donné le chien?

(Notice that the second *qui* in (30c–f) is a relative pronoun, whose non-focal status exempts it from the constraint in (13a).) The possible occurrence of (30b), with its preverbal subject *qui* ('who'), is an apparent exception to the constraint in question. However, as Myers (2007) shows, interrogative *qui* is exceedingly rare as subject in the corpora. Nevertheless, unlike Sesotho, sentences with *qui* in preverbal subject position are grammatical in French. Example (30c) illustrates the use of the frozen sequence *est-ce que* in question formation. This structure is acceptable because the initial question word *qui* functions here predicatively rather than as a subject, the subject being the inverted clitic *ce*. Although acceptable, this type of question formation is rare in the corpora, as Myers (2007) has shown. By far the most common WH-interrogative constructions in spoken French are those in (d) and (e). Both are *c'est*-cleft constructions, with the interrogative *qui* either in COMP position, as in (30d), or in situ, as in (30e). As in (30c), the interrogative word functions predicatively, as the complement of the copula *est*. As a result, the constraint against preverbal focus expressions is not violated. Finally (30f) can be analyzed as a truncated form of the cleft in (30e), the sequence *c'est* being understood. What counts in (f) is that interrogative *qui* is not in preverbal subject position.



## 4.2 Sentence-focus constructions

As stated earlier, the basic discourse function of a sentence-focus construction is to introduce a new entity (presentational function) or a new situation (eventive function) into a discourse. In spoken French, sentence-focus constructions typically are headed by the copula *avoir* 'to have'.

Perhaps the most common sentence-focus construction involving *avoir* is the one involving a relative clause as secondary predicate, a construction I referred to earlier as the *avoir*-cleft construction. What is particularly striking about this construction is that it is not subject to any definiteness effect, unlike its English counterpart, the *there*-construction (see Lambrecht 1988a). A hackneyed Example is the one in (31):

- (31) a. Y a [Le téléphone] qui sonne!  
 a'. #[Le téléphone] sonne!  
 b. [The PHONE]'s ringing!

Even though (31a') is a perfectly well-formed sentence, it is the cleft version in (31a) that will be used most naturally to make an interlocutor aware of a ringing telephone or, more likely, to get the interlocutor to go and pick it up. In English, however, the canonical SV structure will be used, with the characteristic intonation contour caused by prosodic integration of the subject and the predicate under a single sentence accent. Another Example is (32):

- (32) a. J'ai [la tête] qui tourne.  
 a'. #[Ma tête] tourne.  
 b. [My HEAD]'s spinning./I'm dizzy.

Here the cleft sentence in (32a) with its inalienable possession syntax is semantically specialized, to the point that the canonical counterpart in (32a') would not express the same state of affairs (i.e. dizziness of the speaker). In English, however, the literal equivalent of (32a') would be acceptable in the specialized meaning, even though the alternative structure involving the adjective *dizzy* may be more idiomatic.

While the above-described *avoir*-construction involving a relative clause is no doubt the most frequently used sentence-focus construction, it is not uncommon to find other syntactic categories in secondary predicate position (see the diagram in (16) above). Thus in Example (33a), the secondary predicate is an adjective phrase:

- (33) a. T'as [les mains] toutes sales.  
 a'. #[Tes mains] sont toutes sales.  
 b. [Your HANDS] are all dirty.

In the case of (33), the corresponding canonical construction in (a') would be acceptable, but it would not likely be used in a sentence-focus context, i.e. in a

context where the hands in question are not yet a topic under discussion in the discourse. In English, however, the canonical version would be perfectly natural in a sentence-focus context, as (33b) shows.

(34a) illustrates a peculiar French construction, in which the secondary predicate is a past participle preceded by the word *de*:

- (34) a. Y a eu [des conneries] de faites.  
 a'. #[Des conneries] ont été faites.  
 b. [Some dumb THINGS] have been done.  
 b'. There have been [some dumb THINGS] done.

Given the indefiniteness of the complement of *avoir*, the canonical counterpart in (34a') would be borderline unacceptable (see Example (6) and discussion). In English, the canonical version in (34b) is acceptable, even though some speakers may prefer the version in (34b'), whose syntax is rather similar to that of the preferred French version in (34a).

The secondary predicate of an *avoir*-construction can also be a prepositional or adverbial phrase, as in (35a) and (36a):

- (35) a. J'ai [ma mère] à l'hôpital.  
 a'. #[Ma mère] est à l'hôpital.  
 b. [My MOM]'s at the HOSPITAL.
- (36) a. Il m'a dit qu'y avait eu une grève, qu'y avait [cent cinquante filles] dehors.  
 a'. #Il m'a dit qu'y avait eu une grève, que [cent cinquante filles] étaient dehors.  
 b. He told me that there had been a strike, that [a hundred and fifty girls] were fired.

As in earlier examples, the point of the French secondary predication constructions in (35a) and (36a) is to avoid the canonical versions in (35a') and (36a'), while in English such canonical structures would be perfectly natural.

In Section 4.1. we saw that in argument-focus contexts the cleft involving the copula *être* is the typical choice in natural discourse. There are, however, certain eventive sentence-focus contexts, difficult to pin down, in which the *c'est*-cleft is used instead of the *avoir*-cleft. One naturally-occurring Example is shown in (37), from an e-mail from a friend in France during a time when hurricanes devastated parts of the country:

- (37) Je ne sais pas si tu as entendu parler de la tempête qui a traversé la France mais c'était assez terrible et du coup les fêtes ont été un peu plus réservées. Chez ma mère, il y a eu des inondations, et chez mon père ...  
 a. c'est [le toit] qui s'est envolé!

- a'. #[le toit] s'est envolé!  
 'I don't know if you've heard about the storm that went through France but it was pretty terrible and so the holidays were a little more subdued. At my mom's there was flooding, and at my dad's place ...'
- b. [the ROOF] got blown away!

Again, the French cleft in (37a) has the effect of avoiding the canonical version in (37a'). In English the canonical sentence is the natural choice.

The sentence-focus cleft involving *être* is also the construction conventionally used to introduce the characters of jokes. An attested Example is (38):

- (38) a. C'est [une cliente] qui s'approche d'un étalage de poisson et puis qui.. sur le vieux port.. puis elle prend un rouget par la main et puis.. elle le renifle.
- b. [A customer] approaches a fish stand and then.. in the old port.. then she takes a red mullet with her hand and then.. she sniffs it.

As expected, the English version of the joke introduces the joke character in the initial subject position of a regular canonical sentence. (39) is another attested example:

- (39) a. Alors c'est [un Suisse et un Belge] qui discutent.. on mélange les deux.. c'est [un Suisse et un Belge] qui discutent (rires) et il y a [le Suisse] qui dit euh...
- b. So [a Swiss guy and a Belgian guy] are talking.. people mix up the two.. [a Swiss guy and a Belgian guy] are talking (laughs) and [the Swiss guy] says uh...

(39a) is especially revealing because the speaker first uses the *c'est*-cleft to introduce the two characters and then switches to the *avoir*-cleft to continue the joke (*il y a le Suisse qui dit*).

The next construction I would like to discuss has a syntactic structure that does not exactly fit the secondary predication schema in (16). Indeed it lacks the pro and the V elements of the preferred clause construction. According to Sasse (1987), this eventive construction is common in other languages, e.g. in Welsh and in Egyptian Arabic. I will call this the 'eventive (*et*) NP *qui* VP construction'. An Example is (40a):

- (40) a. A: Dis donc, Bernard!  
 B: Quoi?  
 A: [Une drôle de chose] qui m'arrive!
- a'. A: #[Une drôle de chose] m'arrive!
- b. A: Hey, Bernard!  
 B: What?  
 A: [A funny THING]'s happening to me!

Whether we treat the construction illustrated by *Une drôle de chose qui m'arrive* as a truncated form of the *avoir-cleft* *Y a une drôle de chose qui m'arrive* or as a grammatical construction in its own right (as I think it is), it is clear that the presence of the relative pronoun *qui* has the effect of preventing the construal of the sentence as a canonical SV(O) sequence, thereby marking the expressed proposition as eventive. (41) is another example, from a cartoon by Reiser. The cartoon shows a couple of bourgeois intellectuals strolling around an overcrowded Mediterranean beach. The man complains about working class people wasting their hard-earned wages with stupid seaside activities, then he says:

- (41) a. A: La liberté, mais pas pour tout le monde. La liberté, ça se mérite.  
 B: [Ton côté fasciste] qui ressort.  
 B': #[Ton côté fasciste] ressort.
- b. A: Freedom, but not for everyone. Freedom has to be deserved.  
 B: [Your FASCIST SIDE] is coming out.

As in the previous example, the presence of relative *qui* prevents the utterance from taking on the canonical sentence structure while at the same time marking the proposition as expressing an unexpected event.

When the (*et*) NP *qui* VP construction is preceded by the conjunction *et* it often expresses a judgment of non-canonicity vis à vis some unusual or incongruous state of affairs. An Example is (42a), from another cartoon by Reiser. The cartoon shows a man sitting on a park bench with a dog at the end of a leash. When a young woman passes near the bench the dog gets between her legs. Insulted, the woman turns back to the man and says:

- (42) a. Et [ce gros porc] qui ne fait rien!  
 a'. #Et [ce gros porc] ne fait rien!  
 b. And [that fat PIG] doesn't do anything!

Here again, the special construction is used with the effect of preventing an occurrence of the canonical SV(O) sequence as it is naturally used in English.

The last construction I would like to present here also goes beyond the syntactic secondary predication schema in (16). It involves an interesting case of grammaticalization via reanalysis of the subject-verb sequence *je vois* 'I see' into a kind of focus marker for an NP whose referent is not sufficiently accessible in the discourse to appear directly in subject or topic position. The syntactic structure of the construction can be represented as [*je vois* NP pro VP]. (43a) is an attested example. The utterance was made in a Parisian bakery, in a discussion about a new law against fishing in the Seine. At one point, the baker's wife says:

- (43) a. Les trois quarts des pêcheurs ils relâchent leurs poissons.. et même.. je vois  
[mon mari].. il relâche tous ses poissons.  
a'. #(...) et même.. [mon mari] relâche tous ses poissons.  
b. Three quarters of the fishermen let their fish go.. and even .. [my HUSBAND]  
lets ALL his fish go.

For a proper understanding of the pragmatic force of the construction it is crucial to understand that the husband in question (*mon mari*) was not part of the conversation. Thus the sequence *Je vois mon mari* 'I see my husband' cannot be interpreted in its literal meaning. Rather *je vois*, somewhat like *j'ai* in Examples like (3e) or (32a), has become a frozen marker used to introduce a not yet accessible referent as a future topic into a discourse. What distinguishes the construction in (43a) syntactically from the corresponding *avoir*-cleft construction (*J'ai mon mari qui relâche tous ses poissons*) is that what follows the main clause is not a relative but an independent clause of the preferred type.

Another Example is shown in (44a):

- (44) a. Ça dépend des régions, parce que moi, je vois [mes soeurs], elles sont plus  
vieilles que moi.  
a'. #(...) [mes soeurs] sont plus vieilles que moi.  
b. That depends on the region, because me, [my SISTERS] are OLDER than I.

The context of utterance of (44a) is too complex to be summarized here. Suffice it to say that the speaker's sisters (*mes soeurs*) were in no way present in the previous discourse nor visible in the speech situation. The literal interpretation of *Je vois mes soeurs* as 'I see my sisters' is therefore not available. The exact constituent structure of the construction [*je vois* NP pro VP] remains to be established. Given that the sequence [pro VP] is not a phrasal category but a complete sentence (of the preferred-clause type), it would perhaps be preferable to analyze the entire structure as a left-dislocation construction [NP<sub>i</sub> [pro<sub>i</sub> VP]] in which the left-dislocated NP is introduced by a frozen discourse marker (*je vois*). I must leave this matter for future research.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have shown that two genetically and historically closely related languages, English and French, differ nevertheless fundamentally with respect to the way in which pragmatic categories of information structure are paired with syntactic categories of sentence formation. While in English the canonical sentence type [NP VP] is extensively used in discourse, in spoken French this type is subject to severe appropriateness conditions, to the point that it hardly ever

occurs in natural speech. In spite of its relatively rigid word order, spoken French is a language in which focus structure contrasts are strongly realized in syntactic structure. Through the systematic use of realignment constructions, especially secondary predication constructions like clefts, French permits the strict syntactic coding of focus structure distinctions of a type not seen in a language like English. In particular, spoken French has a powerful constraint against comapping of the grammatical relation subject and the pragmatic relation focus. There is a striking similarity between spoken French and certain genetically unrelated languages, such as the Bantu language Sesotho, which suggests a typological division between languages in which focus constituents can be subjects and languages where they can't. It would seem that modern French is on its way to becoming a language like Sesotho, in which the constraint against subject-focus mapping is grammaticalized.

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