

What is Focused in *C'est XP qui/que* Cleft Sentences in French?

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Abstract

Cleft sentences are generally viewed as a focus-related sentence type. Based on an analysis of prosody, it will be shown that there are clefts with other types of informational structure than focus/post-focus, whose existence raises the question of the role and meaning of cleft structures as a whole. It is proposed here that cleft structures do not impose a focus on the XP, but focus (or “zoom in”) on the relationship between an XP (or part of an XP) and the relative clause (or “coda”), which is presupposed but not necessarily given.

1. Introduction

Cleft sentences are generally viewed as focus-related sentence types, the XP in the *c'est XP qui/que* frame being the focus and the relative clause being the post-focus. This view is widely shared [8], as is the view that cleft sentences are prosodically marked for focus through "rhématisation" [10].

This paper will show that these views do not account for the full variety of cleft structures : clefts may have other types of informational organization besides focus/post-focus, and the XP need not be prosodically focused. Thus, it will untie the usual link between clefts and focalization.

As a consequence, we will end up reconsidering the role of the frame *c'est XP qui/que*. Our proposal will be the following : cleft sentences do not impose a focus on XP but focus (or "zoom") on the relationship between the XP and the syntactic coda (that is, the following relative clause). The semantics of *ce* will also be reconsidered.

In our search of what is focused, we will consider various types of clefts according to their informational organization along the ground/focus dimension. The three following types of clefts will be distinguished:

- 1) Type 1: Cleft sentences with a focus/post-focus organization
- 2) Type 2: Explicative all-focus cleft sentences;
- 3) Type 3: Broad-focus cleft sentences, with an XP ending with a major continuation rise.

Type 1 is the prototypical type of cleft sentence. Type 2 has been much less studied, while Type 3 has not been taken into account in the studies of clefts in French.

This study will assume a framework of informational organization involving two axes or dimensions: the ground/focus dimension (topic, focus, postfocus), and the DT (Discourse Topic) dimension in Buring's terminology [3].

2. Type 1: focus/post-focus cleft sentences

The prosody of focus/post-focus clefts has been studied in various publications. Based on this literature and on our own recordings,¹ we will present their main characteristics, introducing new proposals (for the analysis of the postfocal part, for example) at certain points.

The prosody of Type 1 clefts will be considered along the two axes mentioned at the end of the Introduction, beginning with the ground/focus axis, involving the focus/post-focus structure in which the focus corresponds to all or part of the XP and the post-focus to the relative clause.

The prosody of focus/post-focus structures is characterized by :

- a terminal boundary tone (*intonème conclusif*) at the end of the focus part [9], [10], [4], [5]
- an intonational agreement involving a copy of the terminal boundary tone [4], [9], [1], [10]
- a reduction of the register

The terminal boundary tone expresses illocutionary force (assertion, interrogation, etc.). This tone is the same as the one which occurs at the end of an utterance, that is at the end of a broad focus. It also marks the end of the narrow focus part of sentences without clefting, for example the end of *Brutus* in *Qui a tué César? Brutus a tué César* (Rossi [9]). Thus, it signals the end of any focus domain, whether "narrow" or "broad", and it marks focus along the ground/focus dimension. This analysis is basically the same as that of Rossi [9], despite the difference in terminology ("focus" instead of Rossi's "rheme").

Intonational agreement concerns the post-focus part exclusively. It consists in the repetition of the terminal boundary tone occurring at the end of the focus part at the end of the utterance. Intonational agreement is particularly obvious in questions as illustrated by the sentence in (1) and Figure 1, which has an interrogative H% boundary tone at the end of the focused XP (*Jospin*) and another at the end of the utterance (*voilà*).

- (1) [C'est pour Jospin] [que Mathilde a voté]?"
H% H%
[inter.] [inter.]

(Brackets bound intonational phrases.)

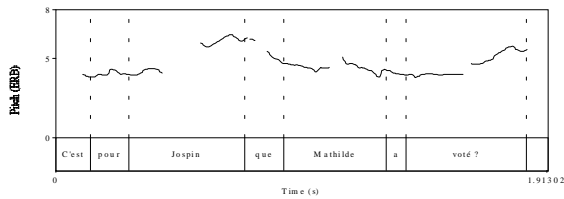


Figure 1. F0 curve of : *C'est pour Jospin que Mathilde a voté?*

Though less obvious, the repetition of the assertive boundary tone L% is also present in statements, as in example (2) :

- (2) [C'est pour Tournier] [qu'elle va voter]
L% L%

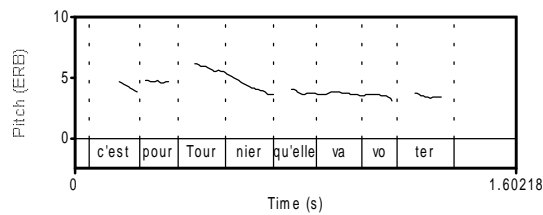


Figure 2. F0 curve of : *C'est pour Tournier qu'elle va voter* as an answer to *Pour qui Mathilde va-t-elle voter?*

The first L% is responsible for the falling contour of the focus part and can also be posited at the end of the post-focus, as there is a low plateau going from the first L% to the end of the utterance. The presence of the low boundary tone has been shown to be the main perceptual cue to the division between the focused and post-focused parts of clefts [10], [11].

Let us briefly consider the postfocal part more closely to see how agreement is implemented here. This part may consist of several intonational phrases, each of which ends with a terminal boundary tone. Statements of this type are realized with a sequence of downstepping L tones as in example (3):

- (3) [C'est dix-sept] [romans policiers] [qu'il a écrits]
L% L% L%

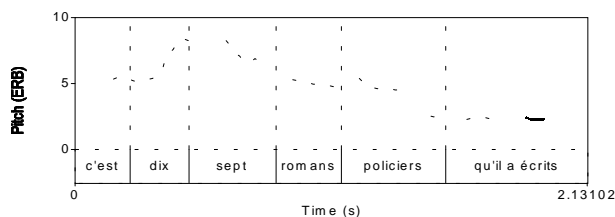


Figure 3. F0 curve of : *C'est dix-sept romans policiers qu'il a écrits*, as an answer to : *C'est combien de romans policiers qu'il a écrits?*

The focus is on *dix-sept*, that is on the first part of the XP, which ends with a L%. The post-focus part is divided into two intonational phrases, [romans policiers] and [qu'il a écrits], each of which ends with a L%. Each L% triggers downstep on a following one, creating a lowering of the pitch range associated with a reduction in intensity.

This type of downstepping realization has been studied previously by a few scholars (Di Cristo and Jankowski, [5]) but without being related to the presence of the L% and to the copy mechanism occurring in the postfocal part.

Intonational agreement is the main prosodic feature of the postfocal part, showing its dependence on the focus part. The other important and well-known characteristic of the postfocal part is the reduction of the overall register (compression of pitch range), of varying magnitude. Register reduction can be related to the fact that the post-focus part corresponds to given information.

Let us now consider a second axis of informational organization which we tentatively call "discourse move" (correspond partly to DT in Buring's terminology). We will take up the well-known questions: Why may cleft sentences have prominent accents, given that they are already focused? What do these accents add? Note no accent is compulsory in a cleft (where only demarcative tones or "ictus" can be found).

We will argue that some of these accents are related to "discourse move" (or DT) organisation. Thus, consider a so-called prosodic arch (*arc prosodique*). Its realization involves two prominences (H*) : the first one occurs at the beginning of the XP (second or first syllable) and the second one on an accented syllable at a phrasal boundary (where it coincides with a continuation rise).

This can be illustrated by example (4).

- (4) Non, [c'est celui de vingt et une heures][que j'ai pris].
H* H* L% L%

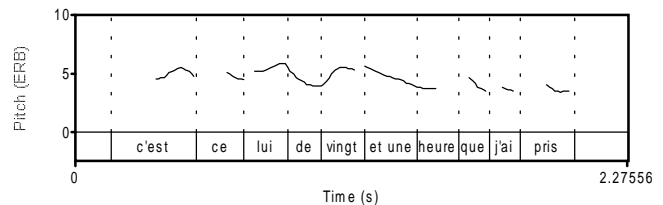


Figure 4. F0 curve of : *Non, c'est celui de vingt et une heures que j'ai pris*, as an answer to the question : *Tu as pris le train de dix-neuf heures?*

Like the English B Accent, this contour signals reference to context set (in (4) this set contains *le train de dix-neuf heures* and its contextual alternates) and forces a partition of the Discourse Topic (in Buring's terms). However, this type of intonation does not characterize cleft sentences or even the focus parts of the utterance. The "prosodic arch" may occur in any part of the ground/focus line (topic, focus or post-focus in which it will appear with a reduced pitch register)[1]. This dimension is orthogonal to focus/post-focus organization, in its realization and its informational role, and it is not related to the clefting.

To summarize, Type 1 clefts are the classical clefts, with the well-known semantic effects associated with them (contrastivity, exhaustive listing).

3. Type 2: explicative all-focus cleft sentences

All-focus cleft sentences have been studied mainly by Boulakia [2]. Typically they are answers to question *Qu'est-ce*

qui se passe? ("What's going on?"). The main intonational characteristics of this information structure are the following :

- only one terminal boundary tone, located at the end of the utterance, is expected in an all-focus sentence. This terminal intoneme may be of any nature, marking statements, questions or requests for confirmation.
- a minor continuation rise at the end of the XP, which signals the end of a rhythmic group, but not the end of an intonational phrase: the utterance corresponds to a unique intonational phrase and is not divided into two intonational phrases.

This type of cleft intonation can be illustrated by example (5). Here, parentheses mark rhythmic groups, and the *h* is a minor continuation rise (*continuation mineure*),

(5) [(C'est le petit) (qui est tombé dans l'escalier)]
h

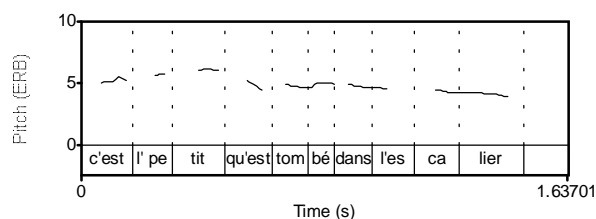


Figure 5. F0 curve of: *C'est le petit qui est tombé dans l'escalier* as an answer to *Qu'est ce qui se passe?*

We propose to analyse such sentences as truncated clefts. The clause *qui est tombé dans l'escalier* is not the coda and the tacit coda ... *qui se passe* ("...that's happening") is being left out. The morpheme *ce* refers to this truncated coda, just as it does to the overt coda in Type 1 clefts (see section 5).

4. Type 3: broad-focus cleft sentences in which the XP ends with a major continuation rise

The third type of cleft sentence is not used to answer questions. Some examples can be observed in the reading of written texts, such as newspaper articles, given the appropriate pragmatic contexts. Our corpus for this context consisted of the reading by two speakers of an extract of an article in *Le Monde*.ⁱⁱ Other examples can be heard in daily life, as when welcoming a guest. For this type we recorded two speakers enacting a dialogue. We also studied a recorded conversation between students in a phonetics laboratory (the "Basset corpus"ⁱⁱⁱ).

Their main intonational characteristics are the following :

The XP ends with a major continuation rise;

The relative clause is not realized as a post-focus: there is no intonational agreement or register compression.

An example is given in (6).

(6) [Ce sont les visiteurs] [qui les déposent] [le plus simplement du monde]
H%[cont] H%[cont] H%[cont]

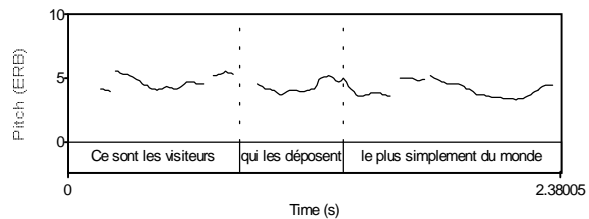


Figure 6. F0 curve of: *Ce sont les visiteurs qui les déposent le plus simplement du monde*, occurring in the context: *En ce qui concerne les livres, ...* (extracted from a reading of an article in *Le Monde*)

This sentence is divided into three intonational phrases, each of which ends with a H%[cont] continuation rise. The XP *les visiteurs* ends an intonational phrase, which can be analyzed as part of a broad focus. The following relative does not correspond to any given information and is not backgrounded. This example differs from Type 1 and from Type 2 clefts, as it is not truncated: *ce* refers to the overt relative.

Examples (7) and (8) below will be shown to have exactly the same properties :

(7) [C'est avec plaisir] [que je vous reçois]
H% L%

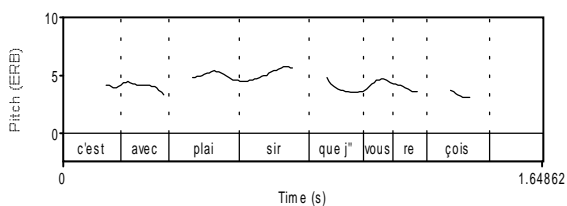


Figure 7. F0 curve of: *C'est avec plaisir que je vous reçois*.

(8) [C'est il y a quelques mois seulement] [que les galibis...]
H%

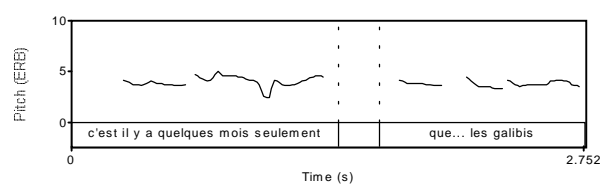


Figure 8. F0 curve of: *C'est il y a quelques mois seulement que les galibis [ont adopté un alphabet]*, extracted from a recorded conversation between two students (Basset corpus)

We will also treat exclamatory sentences in which the continuation rise is combined with an exclamatory intoneme as belonging to the same category. Sentence (9) illustrates:

(9) [C'est ma sœur] [qui va rigoler]
H % [excl] L%

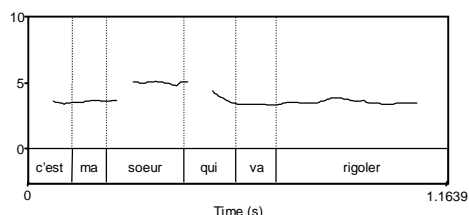


Figure 9. F0 curve of: *C'est ma soeur qui va rigoler!*

In this sentence, *soeur* bears a high tone and is at the same time lengthened.

Thus, in Type 3 clefts, the XP does not coincide with a prosodic focus (or rheme). Semantically, there is no effect of exhaustive listing, which was present in Type 1 cleft sentences.

4. How do clefts differ from their non-cleft counterparts?

We have shown that cleft sentences are not necessarily organized into focus/post-focus sequences and that they need not be linked to focus organization. They differ from their non-cleft counterparts in that the information in the coda is expressed by a subordinate clause and not in the matrix clause. As a result, the information in the coda is *presupposed* in the sense that its truth value cannot be affected by the negation of the matrix sentence.

The same judgments are valid both for Type 1 and Type 3, as illustrated in 10.

- 10 a. #On dit que c'est pour cette raison qu'elle n'est plus jamais revenue (Type 1 or Type 3), mais ce n'est pas vrai: elle est revenue plusieurs fois.
 'They say that it's because of this reason that she never came back, but that's not true: she came back several times'
 b. On a dit que pour cette raison elle n'est plus jamais revenue, mais ce n'est pas vrai: elle est revenue plusieurs fois.
 'They say that because of that reason she never came back, but that's not true: she came back several times'

The presuppositional nature of the coda directly follows from its embedded status: the truth value of a subordinate clause, never being affected by the negation in the matrix (see above), a subordinate clause whose contents is presented as true is therefore bound to be presuppositional.

As we saw previously, the information in the coda can be part of the broad focus of the sentence, as in Type 3 clefts, but this is not the information focused on. We propose that clefts, imposing merely a presuppositional organization, focus, or "zoom in", on the relation between the XP and the coda..

5. Some consequences for the semantics of *ce*

The cleft is a sentence type that depends on the interpretation of *ce*. Informally, *ce* relates two predicates, one of which is pragmatically given or corresponds to the coda and the other of which corresponds to the XP, as shown in (11). It specifies that there is an event variable *e* to which both predicates apply.

$$(11) \quad [_D \text{ ce}] \Rightarrow \lambda Q[Q(\lambda x(P(x)))]$$

In an example like *c'est dans le jardin qu'il joue* for instance, this results in: $\exists e$ [in the garden(*e*) & play(he, *e*)], for which we specify that [play(he, *e*)] constitutes a presupposition (In truncated clefts, the interpretation of the first predicate will be filled in by pragmatic means).

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have shown that the relation between focus and clefting is far less direct than is usually assumed, and that clefts may have various types of informational organization besides the prototypical focus/post-focus one. In particular in Type 3 clefts, the material in the relative coda is *new* information too, but it is explicitly presented as *presupposed* (a property it shares with the codas in Type 1 clefts, where it rather constitutes *given* information).

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ⁱTwo types of recordings were made : 1) 15 cleft sentences in Questions/answers context by two speakers, 2) one cleft sentence recorded with various attitudes and emotions by five speakers. The acoustic analysis was performed with PRAAT.

ⁱⁱUn détenu témoigne du prosélytisme islamiste dans les prisons françaises, *Le Monde*, 31/10/2001

ⁱⁱⁱThis 31-minute-long corpus involving three speakers was recorded and digitalized by P. Basset.