Information Structure in Manitoban French – Identificational Clefts and Left-detachment Structures.

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Abstract:
This paper examines aspects of the interaction between syntax and information structure, specifically detached syntactic structures in the spoken language, in the variety of French spoken in Manitoba, Canada. The data is analyzed using Role and Reference Grammar as a theoretical framework.

Manitoban French exhibits a variety of structures containing the identificational c’est (‘it is’) cleft. This element has the effect of creating narrow focus on the constituent that follows. In the use of c’est in detached constructions, focus structure can be seen to override issues of coreference between the pronominal and the detached element.

In other words, rather than studying the referents that the pronominal ce can corefer with, this analysis highlights the significance of information structure by examining together those sentences where the c(’est) is a focus–marking element.

Other uses of the c’est cleft to achieve different pragmatic nuances are also noted, such as employing detachments within detachments. In terms of syntactic structure, these sentences also illustrate nominal, adjectival and clausal (3) predicates following c’est.

This paper is innovative empirically as it highlights uses of detachment and cleft structures in a variety of French virtually ignored in the literature on information structure and analyzes it using RRG.

1. INTRODUCTION
This paper examines aspects of the interaction between syntax and information structure in the variety of French spoken in Manitoba, Canada, specifically detached syntactic structures in the spoken language. French has a rigid syntactic and focus structure, in particular a constraint against a focal element appearing in pre-verbal position, and so it employs various constructions for pragmatic purposes. Manitoban French, with its relative geographical isolation from the rest of francophone Canada, nonetheless exhibits a similar variety of structures containing the identificational cleft which begins c’est (‘it is’). This element has the pragmatic effect of creating marked narrow focus on the constituent that follows and this is a feature common to various types of sentences containing c’est. This focus structure function can override issues of coreference between the pronominal ce and other elements in the sentence

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and this behaviour will be illustrated most clearly in left-detached sentences containing *c’est*.

The theory used for the analysis is Role and Reference Grammar theory (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997). This theory allows for the interaction of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors, all of which are shown to be relevant for the structures discussed in this paper. This is diagrammed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Organization of Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin 2002:1)

Role and Reference Grammar also makes use of the term ‘nucleus’ to refer to the predicating element in a sentence, whether that be a verb, a noun phrase, an adjective or another type of element. The elements of a simple sentence are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Example sentence showing formal representation of the layered structure of the clause (adapted from Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 34).

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1 Based on paper presented at the International Conference on Role and Reference Grammar, 2002, Universidad de la Rioja, Logroño, Spain.
This aspect of the theory facilitates structures for detached sentences, and also cleft sentences in particular, which reflect the similar nature and role of the post-copular constituent. It also highlights the distinction in clefts between the (copular) verb and the predication element.

In the first section of this paper the speech community from where the data comes is briefly described. The identificational c’est cleft is then described before moving on to detachment structures and those containing c’est in particular. A unified Role and Reference Grammar analysis for both types of structure is presented and finally remarks are given on a couple of other interesting uses of detachment in this Manitoban variety of French.

2. MANITOBAN FRENCH

The focus of this study is the French spoken in the town of St Pierre-Jolys, in Manitoba, Canada, located fifty-six kilometers south of Winnipeg. The majority of its population of about 925 are commuters (to Winnipeg) and farmers. While everyone in the town has a generally good level of English, French is spoken throughout the village. The French speakers of Manitoba have had to fight to preserve their cultural heritage. As a result, the inhabitants of St Pierre are now very proud of their ethnolinguistic heritage and there are several cultural events during the year that reflect this. However, it is also true that the speech of the children of St Pierre often contains a few English words; for example, C’est l’fun.

3. THE C’EST CLEFT

The first structure found in this variety of French that will be examined is the cleft involving c’est, referred to in the literature as the identificational cleft after its role identifying the clefted constituent as the referent of the non-lexically filled argument in the relative clause. The impersonal pronoun c/ce is coupled with the copula and the NP that would otherwise be the subject of the sentence is its object. For example, (1) taken from Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 209):

(1) C’est ma voiture qui est en panne.
   ‘It’s my car that has broken down.’ (My CAR has broken down)

This cleft is called the identificational cleft in the literature since the “first clause identifies a referent as an argument of an understood proposition” (Lambrecht 1984: 248). This is illustrated for example (2) below (following Lambrecht 1994: 226). This type of construction occurs if “the referent of the canonical subject would have a focus relation to the proposition and if the information conveyed by the proposition is itself not new but recoverable (‘presupposed’)” (Lambrecht 1984: 248), that is, to create narrow focus on the would-be subject. Lambrecht’s definition of
focus which is adopted for the purposes of this analysis relies less on any ‘old’/’new’ distinction than on the relation between the focus and presupposed elements in the sentence. Hence the focus is defined as “the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition” (Lambrecht 1994: 213). The following examples come from the St Pierre data, with the clefts underlined:

(2) Je vie encore ici, dans la même maison que je suis née dedans.
    I live still here, in the same house that I am born inside.
    C'était mon mari qui est déménagé.
    It was my husband who is moved.
    ‘I still live here, in the same house that I was born in. It was my husband who moved.’
    Sentence: C’était mon mari qui est déménagé
    It was my husband who is moved
    It was my husband who moved
    Presupposition: ‘x moved’
    Assertion: ‘x = my [speaker’s] husband’
    Focus: ‘my [speaker’s] husband’
    Focus domain: NP

(3) Oui, mais c’était des élèves qui étaient, qui passaient plus de temps sur les murs que assis sur les chaises.
    Yes, but it was the students who were, who spent more of time on the walls than seated on the chairs.
    ‘Yes, but, it was (there were) students who were, who spent more time on the walls than seated in their chairs.’

(4) Ben, c’est qu’ les hôtels, dans ce temps là, ils avaient du bon sens; c’est seulement les hommes qui peu’y aller; alors i’ étaient à l’ abri.
    Well, it’s that the hotels, at that time, they had good sense; it’s only the men who could go there; so they were ‘in the shade’.
    ‘Well, it’s that the hotels, at that time, they had good sense, it’s only men who could go there, so they were ‘in the shade’.’

Lambrecht suggests that the verb form in these constructions is “more or less frozen” (1984:249) as third person singular present est. The St Pierre data (see (2) and (3)) suggests the tense is not quite completely frozen.

These examples reflect the fact that the c’est, in this variety of French at least, seems to potentially function differently from its counterpart in English, it is. C’est appears to carry little or no semantic meaning, rather is carrying out a pragmatic focus-marking function. The
combination of ce plus the copula assigns focus to the following non-verbal predicate. This explains why such sentences pattern with the referential pronominal use of ce with the copula in example (8) ((5) – (8) are taken from Hedberg (2000: 893) and range from the dummy it in (5) to the referential it in (8). The ungrammaticality of il in (7) and (8) occurs because il + être does not carry the same pragmatic focus-marking function as ce + être in the respective constructions and the required narrow focus on the following non-verbal predicate does not occur.

(5) Il/?ce/?? cela me semble que tu as tort.
   it/this to.me seems that you have wrong.
   ‘It seems to me that you are wrong.’

(6) Il/*ce/ ?ca neige.
   it/this snows.
   ‘It’s snowing.’

(7) (a) *Il/c’est John que j’ai vu.
   it/this is John that I have seen.
   ‘It’s John that I saw.’

(8) (a) *Il/ce n’est pas vrai.
   it/this NEG is not true
   ‘It isn’t true.’

   (Hedberg 2000: 893).

In fact, to translate the demonstrative pronoun that as in (7b) and (8b), one has to use the respective pronoun ça in left-detached position, together with c’est in the main clause, in order for the same narrow focus pattern as in (7) and (8) to remain in place:

(7) (b) Ça, c’est John que je vois
   That, it is John that I see
   ‘That’s John that I can see.’

(8) (b) Ça, ce n’est pas vrai.
   That, it NEG is not true.
   ‘That isn’t true.’

Thus the patterning of the use of ce in clefts with its referential use in sentences such as (8) can be explained in terms of focus structure constraints. The proposed structure for the identificational cleft construction is thus as follows in figure 3. The cleft clause syntactically resembles a relative clause, in terms of containing a relative pronoun or complementizer followed by a core structure with one argument ‘missing’. Despite not being a ‘head-modifier’ relationship as in relative clauses, it is nevertheless part of a ‘value-variable’ type of relationship and is thus considered a peripheral element, as a relative clause would be. As can be
seen from its relationship to the logical semantic structure (directly connected via linking rules in Role and Reference Grammar, which are omitted in figure 3), clefts are essentially identificational structures and the cleft clause fills the second semantic argument position (following Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 156). A detailed analysis of this proposal would be tangential here, but is the work of current studies by the author². The post-copular element is the nucleus (in semantic terms, the predicative element) of the same core.

Figure 3 : Syntactic and logical structure for identificational cleft structures

4. DETACHMENT STRUCTURES

In left detached (LD) constructions, an element appears to the left of the main clause. This detached element may (see examples 9 and 10) or may not (see examples 11-13) corefer with an anaphorical pronominal element in the main clause. In cases where there is no pronominal anaphoric element, there is still usually a type of referential linking between the detached element and the main clause in the sense that the detached NP sets the context for the following proposition. According to Chafe (1976: 50) it “limit[s] the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain” (see, for example, sentence 12 below).

² The status, both syntactic and semantic, of the cleft pronoun it is problematic. In the structure given here, while it is not considered to be a fully referential element, it still functions here as a syntactic argument of the core, and is marked as such.
In terms of information structure, detached sentences have a dual effect: they are typically invoked to achieve somewhat marked predicate focus but also simultaneously to topicalize the detached constituent. Lambrecht (1994: 183) notes that the “detachment… construction is a pragmatic device used to promote referent from accessible to active…” and he notes it is used with contrastive topic NPs (as in (13)). The following examples are from St Pierre (the detached NP is underlined):

(9) Le printemps, il était venu tard.
    the Spring, it was came late.
    ‘The spring, it came late.’

(10) Ces gens cela, il’ ont assuré la survie du français au
    These people this, they have ensured the survival of French at
    Manitoba.
    Manitoba.
    ‘These people, they assured the survival of French in Manitoba.’

(11) Moi, ça dépend avec qu’est-ce que je veux faire, ça.
    Me that depends with what is it that I want to do, that.
    ‘Me, that depends on what it is I want to do, that.’

(12) On était mieux, eux-autres, eux-autres, c’était pire.
    We were better, those-others, those-others, it was worse.
    ‘We were better-off, those-others, those-others, it was worse.’

(13) Quoi qu’à St Jean, Grand Fourches, les gens étaient pas
    What that at St Jean, Grand Forks, the people were not
    habitués des inondations tellement, celle de ’97, c’était effrayant
    used to the floods so, this of ’97, it was frightening
    pour les autres. St Jean Baptiste, c’est une mode de vie.
    for the others. St Jean Baptiste, it is a way of life.
    ‘However (it was) at St Jean, Grand Forks, people weren’t accustomed
    to such floods; the one in ’97, it was frightening for the others. St
    Jean-Baptiste, it’s a way of life.’

In terms of syntactic structure within the Role and Reference Grammar framework, the detached element occupies the left-detached position, outside the main clause, as illustrated in figure 4. This position is reserved for elements which lie within the sentence but outside the scope of clausal-level operators such as tense and illocutionary force.
Generally, the anaphoric pronominal element in the main clause of a detachment sentence corefers, and agrees, with the detached NP, as illustrated in Figure 4. However, this is not always the case. Several of the speakers from St Pierre use the third person impersonal pronominal ce rather than the personal il/elle with detached lexical NPs:

(14) Guy, c’est le meilleur goûteur à beurre.
    ‘Guy, he is the best butter taster.’

(15) Ma mère, c’est… Mme Ovila Desharnais.
    ‘My mother, she’s…Mrs Ovila Desharnais.’

(16) Alors des anglais, c’est des ennemis!
    ‘So the English, they’re the enemies!’

(17) …des français, des francophones, c’est têtu, ça un peu.
    ‘…the French, French-speakers, they’re stubborn, just a bit.’

As with the impersonal ce, the personal pronominal forms il/elle are used both with referents denoting people (examples 10) and referents not denoting people (examples 9). It would appear, therefore, that the human/non-human distinction is not helpful in understanding the use of ce versus il/elle.

Lambrecht (1981: 43) argues that a generic/specific distinction, while not accounting for all examples, is relevant. The example he uses to illustrate this is repeated below:
From his own intuitions, Lambrecht interprets (18a) with a more generic reference; it would be used in a supermarket to locate the vegetable section. (18b), on the other hand, would be used by someone who gets home from the supermarket and is trying to locate the vegetables s/he bought (Lambrecht 1981: 43). While the generic/specific distinction is evident, this account does not seem to fit the St Pierre data in (14-17): no generic reading is possible for the detached noun phrases in (14) and (15). This suggests there could be additional factors involved in the choice of ce over il/elle.

It can be seen from the data that ce is always used as the pronominal element when the verb is être. In fact, in identificational sentences such as (15), a personal pronoun would be ungrammatical:

(15′) *Ma mère, elle est…Mme Ovila Desharnais.

It will also be remembered that c’est is used in the identificational c’est cleft to create narrow focus on the non-verbal predicate that follows. In fact, what is proposed is that rather than studying the referents that the pronominal ce can corefer with, the significance of information structure can be highlighted by patterning sentences such as (14-17) above with those such as (12-13) which have no formal coreference and where the c(’est) is a focus–marking element, as it is in the identificational cleft.

Thus, in Lambrecht’s examples (18) above, rather than focussing on the implications of ce or il coreferring with the detached NP, (18a) is viewed as not necessarily having any real syntactic anaphor, rather it is an example of a sentence exploiting the focus-marking properties of c’est.

This also correlates with Barnes’ (1985: 49) observation that “the use of left detachment is quasi-obligatory with lexical subjects of être whenever ce/c’ is an appropriate anaphor” and that the form NP c’est is thus becoming grammaticalized, in other words, whenever LD c’est is a possible option, it will be used. This is reflected in the St Pierre data with the semi-frozen nature of the verb as the third person present form est.

In addition, the relative independence of the form c’est as a ‘frozen’ pragmatic marker can be seen in other constructions. The construction c’est que, used in conjunction with LD to place a whole clause in focus, as in (25) below, is also used autonomously in St Pierre French, as
in the following example. In this type of construction c’est que approaches the function of “marker of conversational structure” (Barnes 1988: 42) along the lines of ben (‘well’) and voilà (‘there it is’) and the highly frequent pis (‘(and) then’). These markers “ensur[e] the ongoing smooth development of the discourse” (Barnes 1988: 42-3).

(19) Ben, c’est qu’les hôtels, dans ce temps là, ils avaient du
Well, it is that the hotels, in this time there, they had of
bon sens.
good sense.
‘Well, it’s that hotels, at that time, they had good sense.’

However, it should be noted that there are several sentences in the data involving the verb être which are not detached, that is, are SVO word order, and which do not contain the form c’est (see (20) where it is not la bulle d’air, c’est grosse) thus suggesting that Barnes’ claim that the form NP c’est is always used and is becoming grammaticalized should be reassessed:

(20) H: Pis… on fait de meilleur argent là quand ils ont des
Then…we make of better money there when they have the
bulles d’air autour là.
bubbles of air around there.
G: La bulle d’air est grosse.
The bubble of air is fat.
H: ‘Then…we make better money when they have air bubbles around there.’
G: ‘The air bubble is big/rich [pun].’

(21) Et pis M. Bourgeois, il (nous) a conduit, et M. Bourgeois
And then Mr Bourgeois, he us has drove, and Mr Bourgeois
est taquineur.
is tease.
‘And then Mr Bourgeois, he drove us, and Mr Bourgeois is a tease.’

(22) Pour faire le sirop, euh, on le… le sirop bouillit à 105°, le
For to make the syrup, uh, we the…the syrup boils at 105°, the
point d’ébullition est 105°.
point of boiling is 105°.
‘To make syrup, uh, we…the syrup boils at 105°, the boiling point is 105°.’

In these SVO sentences the focus, by default, already falls on the non-verbal predicate. A possible reason behind the absence of detachment could be that the subject NPs in these sentences are highly topical, in each case having been mentioned in the sentence before, thus perhaps lessening the need for the topicalizing LD construction since in
these cases the referents are already active. These examples illustrate how the use of c’est as a pragmatic marker works in conjunction with the topicalizing effect of LD.

In summary, rather than studying the possible referents of the pronoun ce, this paper has highlighted the significance of information structure by patterning together sentences where the c’est is a focus-marking element.

In the use of c’est in detached constructions in the French of St-Pierre, issues of focus structure stemming from the use of c’est can be seen to override issues of coreference between the pronoun and the detached element and so three sentences such as (23-25), for example, have much in common in terms of information structure. In addition, in terms of syntactic structure, these sentences also illustrate the various non-verbal predicates that this construction involves: nominal (23), adjectival (24) and finally clausal (25) where a whole clause functions as, and is therefore labelled as, the nucleus of the clause. The structure for (25) is given in figure 5.

l’problème, c’est qu’les gens savent parler (…)

Figure 5: Structure for (25)
(23) Guy, c’est le meilleur goûteur à beurre.
Guy, it is the best taster at butter.
‘Guy, he is the best butter taster.’

(24) On était mieux... eux-autres, c’était pire.
We were better...those-others, it was worse.
‘We were better-off...those others, it was worse.’

(25) l’ problème, c’est qu’ les gens savent parler...
the problem, it is that the people know how to talk...
‘the problem, it’s that people know how to talk…’

This analysis, in highlighting the pragmatic function of c’est, enables a unified analysis of the superficially different constructions: these types of left-detached sentences (23-25) and the c’est cleft (2, repeated).

(2) C’ était mon mari qui est demenagé
It was my husband who is moved
‘It was my husband who moved’

Rather than looking at the nature of the relationship between the referent of the left detached constituent and the pronominal element in the main clause, this paper has looked at the conditions under which the c’est constituent appears to carry out the pragmatic function of conveying narrow focus on the (predicative) element that follows.

With the nature, and even existence, of coreference between the left-detached element and the pronominal in question, there were shown to be similarities in pragmatic function between types of left-detached sentences with and without anaphor in the main clause. These similarities were seen, in some cases, to override considerations of grammatical agreement.

6. ADDITIONAL REMARKS

As a final note, Manitoban French speakers exploit detachment and the c’est cleft in other ways to achieve different pragmatic nuances, such as employing detachments within detachments, and using the c’est cleft within a detached element. The structures for these types of sentences are given below in Figure (6) and Figure (7) respectively. Further research is needed to determine how freely such structures can be combined and how frequently this occurs.
Moi, quand j’étais jeune, on parlait seulement en français.
Me, when I was young, we spoke only in French.
’Me, when I was young, we spoke only in French.’

Figure 6

c’est mon cœur, i’est ici.
It is my heart, he is here.
’It’s my heart, it’s here.’

Figure 7
REFERENCES


