

Superiority effects and the French Plural Pronoun Construction*

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1 The puzzle

1.1 The Plural Pronoun Construction and its inclusive reading

French comitative constructions are introduced by the preposition *avec* ('with'). As shown in (1), the comitative phrase can appear at various places in the sentence: initially, after the verbal complex, or at the end. Following the past literature (Matushansky and Ionin (2002) a.o), we call the main subject of the sentences in (1) the **associate** of the comitative phrase, and the complement of *with* the **comitative DP/pronoun**. Note that in (1) the main verb agrees in gender and number with the associate only (the past participle *allée* being F.SG, like the feminine proper name *Marie*).

- (1) a. **Avec Jean**, Marie est allée au cinéma.
With Jean, Marie is.AUX gone to the movie theater.
'With Jean, Marie went to the movies.'
- b. Marie est allée **avec Jean** au cinéma.
Marie is.AUX gone with Jean to the movie theater.
'With Jean, Marie went to the movies.'
- c. Marie est allée au cinéma **avec Jean**.
Marie is.AUX gone to the movie theater with Jean.
'With Jean, Marie went to the movies.'

When the associate is a plural pronoun, as in (2), the comitative construction is dubbed **Plural Pronoun Construction (PPC)**, Schwartz (1985, 1988); Ladusaw (1988); Aissen (1989) a.o.). In French, the PPC allows for two distinct readings: an exclusive ("E") reading and an inclusive ("I") one. Following Feldman (2001) we call PPCs under the I- (resp. E-) reading **IPPCs** (resp. **EPPCs**). IPPCs in particular, have been documented in Mokilese, Latvian Schwartz (1988), Polish (Dyła (1988)), Hungarian, Yapese, Tzotzil Aissen (1989), Turkish Aissen (1989); Turgay and Öztürk (2020), Russian (?Vassilieva and Larson (2005); Feldman (2001)), and Tlingit (Cable (2017)), among others. In such constructions, the comitative DP seems to be "counted in" the interpretation of the associate plural pronoun (such that *we* in (2) ends up referring to *Jean and I*). In French, this fact is reflected by gender agreement: in (2) under the I-reading, the past participle *allés* will be M.SG regardless of the gender of the speaker, which constitutes evidence that the masculine comitative DP *Jean* interferes in subject-verb agreement.¹ Under the I-reading, we will call the interpretation of the associate "minus" the comitative DP (e.g. the speaker *I* in (2)) the **"underlying associate"**.

- (2) **Avec Jean**, nous sommes allés au cinéma.
With Jean, we are.AUX.1.PL gone.M.PL to the movie theater.
E-reading: 'Jean, I and someone else went to the movies.'
I-reading: 'Jean, I and no one else went to the movies.'

This paper focuses on the conditions under which the I-reading of the PPC is available in French.

*I would like to thank Amy Rose Deal and Athulya Aravind for their help and encouragements on that project. All mistakes are mine.

¹This argument builds on the fact that the French gender agreement system is such that with the *be* auxiliary, the past participle will exhibit masculine/default agreement morphology as soon as it agrees with one masculine argument (and potentially, many feminine ones). This principle however, is often disregarded in casual speech or when the subject(s) are displaced. In such cases, speaker may use masculine/default agreement even in the absence of any agreeing masculine element.

1.2 Superiority effects in the IPPC

When the comitative DP and its associate are both pronominal, the I-reading becomes restricted, as shown in (3), where the bracketed index combinations define possible I-readings of the associate, and the indices (1, 2, 3, 3') refer to person features (3' refers to a third person individual different from the comitative pronoun lui_3). For instance, *nous* (1.PL), can be understood as *you and I*, where *I* also refers to the comitative pronoun (moi_1). Crucially, (3) shows that a 1.SG or 2.SG comitative pronoun cannot be “counted in” the plural associate, if the plural associate is underlyingly 3.SG. This observation is summarized in (4). All other pragmatically plausible² combinations of I-readings appear grammatically possible.

$$(3) \text{ Avec } \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} moi_1 & nous_{\{1+2, *1+3\}} \\ toi_2 & nous_{\{2+1\}} \\ lui_3 & nous_{\{3+1\}} \end{array} \right. \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} vous_{\{??2+3\}} & ils_{\{3+3'\}} \end{array} \right. \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{sommes} \\ \text{êtes} \\ \text{sont} \end{array} \right\} \text{ allés au cinéma.}$$

- (4) *Avec moi_1 , $nous_{1+3}$
 *Avec toi_2 , $vous_{2+3}$.

1.3 Summary of the phenomenon

- (5) General form of the I-reading:

With $pro_X \ pro_{X+Y} \ VP$

In the above construction, X and Y are singular entities, respectively the comitative pronoun and the underlying associate. The following Table summarizes the underlying associate/comitative pronoun combinations for which the I-reading is available – or not. Note that the previous literature on the PPC mentions the existence of a somewhat similar pattern in other languages, suggesting it is a linguistic universal Schwartz (1988); Ladusaw (1988). The languages investigated include Tzotzil Aissen (1989), Quiégozani Zapotec Black (1992), and Russian Vassilieva and Larson (2005); Feldman (2001), but contrary to the French case, the pattern for those languages is defined as “strictly descending” (i.e. the whole upper triangle of Table 1 should be red).

$Y \rightarrow$ Avec $X \downarrow$	$je_{1.SG}$	$tu_{2.SG}$	$il_{3.SG}$
$moi_{1.SG}$	$nous_{1.PL} \stackrel{\#}{=} moi+je$	$nous_{1.PL} = moi+tu$	$nous_{1.PL} \stackrel{*}{=} moi+il$
$toi_{2.SG}$	$nous_{1.PL} = toi+je$	$vous_{2.PL} \stackrel{\#}{=} toi+tu$	$vous_{2.PL} \stackrel{*}{=} toi+il$
$lui_{3.SG}$	$nous_{1.PL} = lui+je$	$vous_{2.PL} = lui+tu$	$ils_{3.PL} = lui+il$

Table 1: Availability of the I-reading of the plural associate.

²The combinations 1+1 and 2+2 are not pragmatically plausible under the I-reading because they would involve a comitative DP identical to the underlying associate. Setting up an appropriate *de se* scenario fixes this weirdness and results in grammaticality:

- (1) Je rêvais que j'étais Noam Chomsky, et avec moi nous sommes allés au cinéma.
 I dreamed that I was Noam Chomsky and with 1.SG 1.PL are gone to-the movie theater.
 I dreamed I was Noam Chomsky and that, as Noam, I went to the movie theater with my true self.
- (2) Tu rêvais que tu étais Noam Chomsky, et avec toi vous êtes allés au cinéma.
 You dreamed that you were Noam Chomsky and with 2.SG 2.PL are gone to-the movie theater.
 You dreamed you were Noam Chomsky and that, as Noam, you went to the movie theater with your true self.

³We use the pronoun *nous* to express 1.PL features, but all the observations laid out in this paper generalize to the alternative pronoun *on*, which can also express 1.PL features (in addition to indefinite 3.SG). In particular, participial agreement with *on* follows the same pattern as with *nous*.

The rest of this paper attempts to make sense of the ungrammaticality of the two red cells under the I-reading, i.e. the pronoun combination $\ast\{1, 2\}+3$. In section 2, we argue that the superiority effects witnessed in the French “Inclusive” PPC are a manifestation of the *Weak Person Case Constraint*. Building on Deal’s (2022) *Dynamic Interaction & Satisfaction* framework, we propose a concrete solution to the puzzle in Section 3. Section 4 discusses potential objections to the account, and further implications thereof.

2 The proposal

2.1 Some background on the Person Case Constraint, and its “weak” flavor

The Person Case Constraint (PCC, Meyer-Lübke (1899); Perlmutter (1971); Bonet (1991, 1994); Anagnostopoulou (2017)) restricts the co-occurrence of personal pronouns in double AGREE configurations – typically ditransitive constructions. The **Weak PCC** (Perlmutter (1971); Bonet (1991); Riedel (2009); Stegovec (2019) a.o.) is one of many “flavors” of the constraint, as shown by Table 2. It states that a third person dative pronoun cannot co-occur with a first or second person accusative/absolutive pronoun. This constraint is exemplified in (6) for Catalan.

IO	DO	Strong	Weak	Me-first	Ultrastrong
1	2	*			
1	3				
2	1	*		*	*
2	3				
3	1	*	*	*	*
3	2	*	*		*

Table 2: Different flavors of the PCC, taken from Nevins (2007). “IO” and “DO” respectively refer to Indirect and Direct Object.

(6) The Weak PCC in Catalan (Bonet, 1991)

- a. * A en Josep, **me** **li** va recomanar la Mireia.
to the Josep 1.ACC.CL 3.DAT.CL recommended the Mireia
Intended: ‘She (Mireia) recommended me to him (Josep).’
- b. * A en Josep, **te** **li** va recomanar la Mireia.
to the Josep 2.ACC.CL 3.DAT.CL recommended the Mireia
Intended: ‘She (Mireia) recommended you to him (Josep).’

Deal (2022) proposes a unified account of the PCC, which is solely based on agreement between a head and two goals, unlike earlier accounts relying on cliticization (e.g. Bianchi (2006); Stegovec (2019); Coon and Keine (2021)). In Deal’s framework, probing is understood as *Dynamic Interaction and Satisfaction*, a key concept which constitutes a refinement of the model laid out in earlier work (Deal, 2015). Under that line of analysis, each probing head comes with two conditions defining its agreement routine: a Satisfaction condition (“S”) and an Interaction condition (“I”). The Satisfaction condition defines the kind of feature that will cause the probe to stop probing. The Interaction condition defines the kind of feature with which a probe can AGREE with, at each given point of the probing process. Crucially, the Interaction condition is *dynamic*, in that its specification may depend on previously agreed with elements. Different parametrizations of the Interaction and Satisfaction conditions allow to derive the different flavors of the PCC.

2.2 Connecting our data to the Weak PCC

2.2.1 Probe specifications

Following Deal (2022), we assume the following person feature hierarchy:

- (7) a. $\Phi > \text{PART} > \text{SPKR}, \text{ADDR}$

This hierarchy suggests that both first and second person pronouns (respectively SPKR and ADDR) contain the PART and the Φ features. Third person pronouns on the other hand, only involve Φ . In the

following, we will disregard the SPKR and ADDR features and substitute them for the PART feature they contain, as PART will end up being more critical in deriving the attested pronoun combinations. We assume that in the context of the PPC, double-AGREE occurs in T, an insatiable probe ($S : -$) which initially interacts with Φ -features ($I : \Phi$); but will only interact with PART features once a PART feature has been agreed with. This probe specification, schematized in (8), is directly inspired by Deal’s modeling of Weak PCC effects in the verbal domain. Crucially, condition (8b) entails that as soon as T agrees with a first or second person pronoun (bearing the PART feature), T becomes unable to subsequently agree with a third person pronoun (not bearing the PART feature).

- (8) a. $T : \begin{bmatrix} I & : & \Phi \\ S & : & - \end{bmatrix}$
 b. $\text{AGREE}(T, \text{PART}) \Rightarrow T : \begin{bmatrix} I & : & \text{PART} \\ S & : & - \end{bmatrix}$

2.2.2 Configuration of the two goals

Based on the restrictions in Table 1, we now establish a parallel between X (the comitative pronoun in the French IPPC) and Y (the underlying associate), on the one hand; and the direct and indirect object of standard PCC configurations, on the other hand. In the latter configuration, the ban on third person indirect objects in the presence of a first or second person direct object is derived by assuming that the direct object agrees first with the head, and so, crucially, *before* the indirect object.

In the case of the IPPC, the ban concerns a third person underlying associate (Y) in the presence of a first or second person comitative pronoun (X). Therefore, X seems to take the role of a direct object, while Y takes the role of an indirect object. This entails that X should agree with T first, and Y, second. To ensure that this is the case, we assume that the subject of the IPPC is underlyingly complex, and in particular involves a high adjunct PP *Avec X*, modifying the head Y.⁴ This is shown in Figure 1.⁵

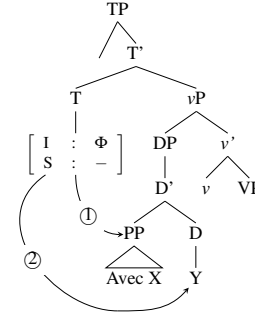


Figure 1: Putative structure of the IPPC

3 Deriving the possible pronoun configurations under the I-reading

Let us now see how the above model captures the desired pronoun combinations in the French IPPC.

3.1 T-probing

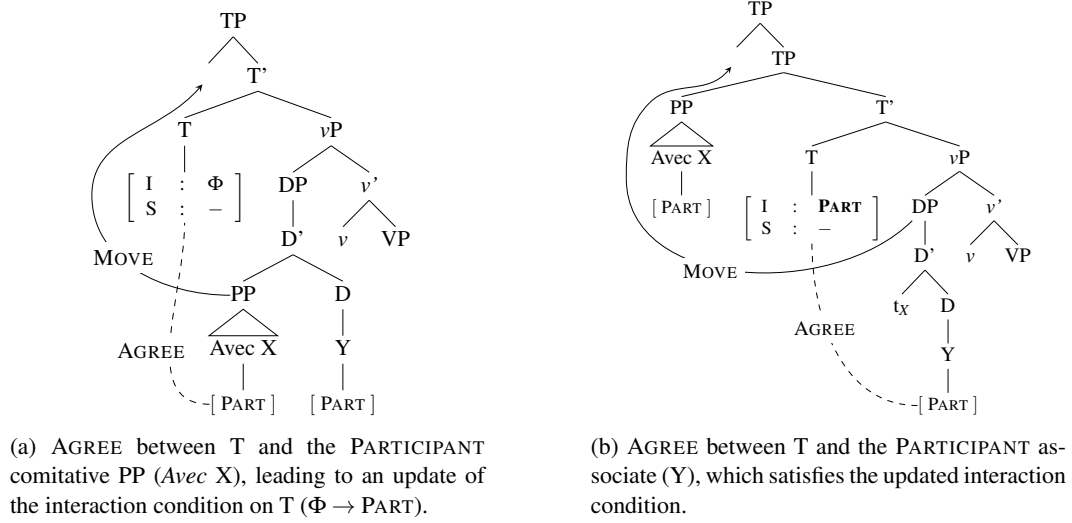
We focus first on agreement between T, the comitative PP *Avec X* and the underlying associate Y. Section 3.2 will explain how the comitative and the associate are eventually spelled out.

3.1.1 Deriving the $\{1, 2\} + \{1, 2\}$ combination

The I-reading is allowed when the comitative pronoun and the underlying associate are both either first or second person (top left 2-by-2 square of Table 1); in other words, when both bear PART features. Figure 2 illustrates how these combinations are licensed by Deal’s agreement system.

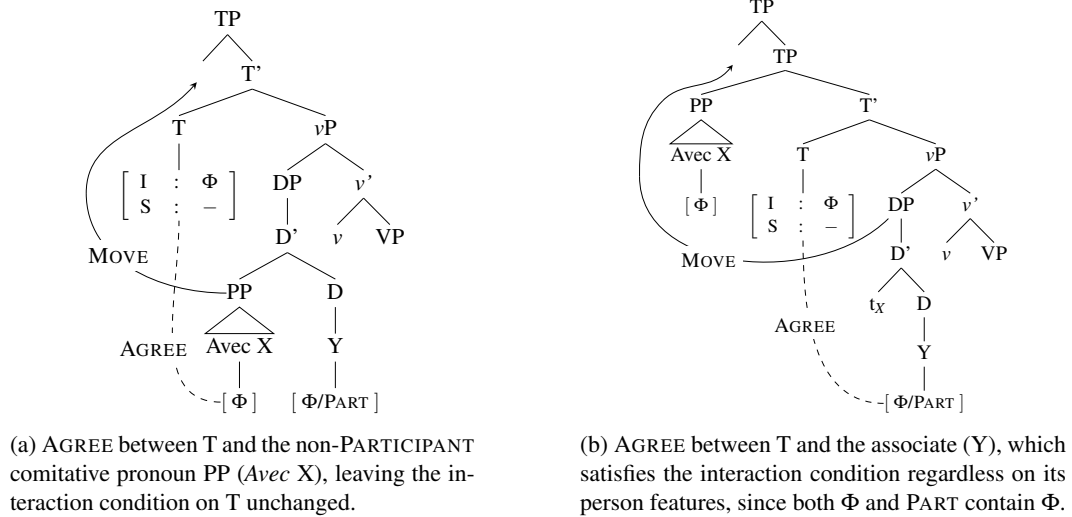
⁴I want to thank Amy Rose Deal for suggesting this structure to me, which better captures some properties of the IPPC and appears more in line with the previous literature on the topic (e.g. Vassilieva and Larson 2005; Feldman 2001) than the initial two-layer structure I had thought of.

⁵Note that this structure is assumed for IPPCs only; it is not expected to extend to PPCs under the E-reading (EPPCs). Section 3.3 will briefly discuss those constructions.


 Figure 2: Successful T-probing with the $\{1, 2\} + \{1, 2\}$ combination

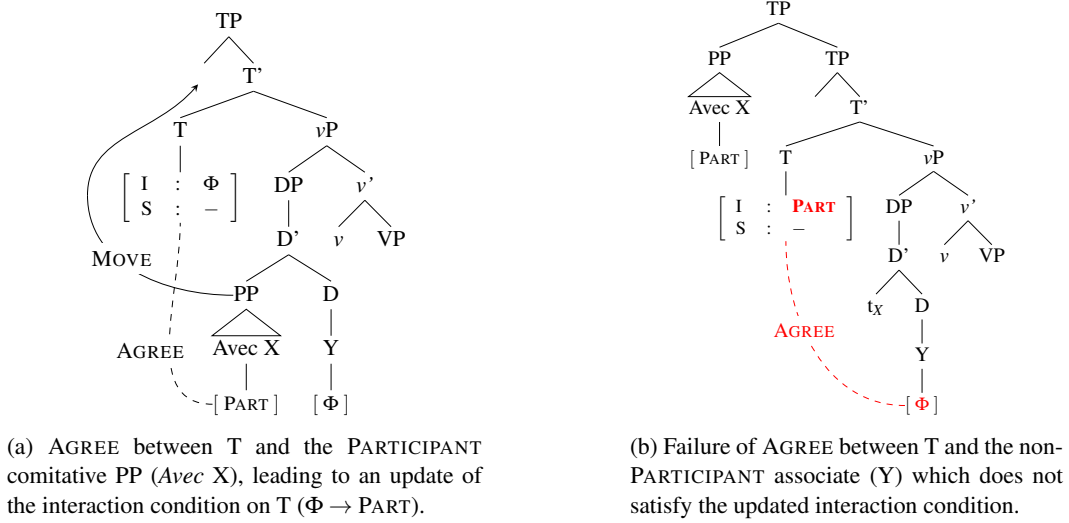
3.1.2 Deriving the $3 + \{1, 2, 3\}$ combination

The I-reading is also allowed whenever the comitative pronoun is third person, i.e., a non-participant bearing the Φ feature (last row of Table 1). Figure 3 illustrates how these combinations are licensed by Deal's agreement system.


 Figure 3: Successful T-probing with the $3 + \{1, 2, 3\}$ combination

3.1.3 Ruling out the $\{1, 2\} + 3$ combination

We now come to the person combinations banned under the I-reading: first or second person (i.e. PARTICIPANT) comitative pronoun and third person (i.e. non-PARTICIPANT) underlying associate (cf. red cells of Table 1). Those combinations are correctly ruled-out thanks to the *dynamic* character of the interaction condition: as shown in Figure 4, once T has interacted with the PART comitative pronoun, it will no longer be able to interact with the non-PART, third person underlying associate.

Figure 4: Failure of T-probing with the $\{1, 2\}+3$ combination

3.2 Getting to the surface form

All successful AGREE configurations end up with Y in the higher Spec-TP and *Avec X* in the lower Spec-TP, as shown in Figure 5.

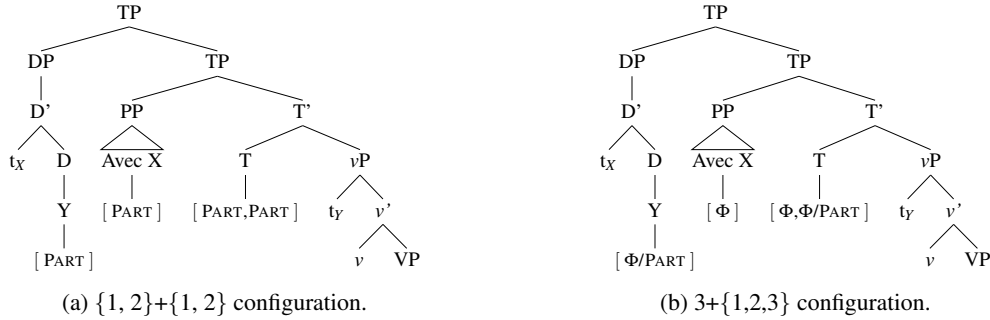


Figure 5: Possible pronoun configurations after T-probing in the IPPC.

To derive the surface structures *avec pro_X*, *pro_{X+Y} VP* (cf. (1a)) and *pro_{X+Y} VP avec pro_X* (cf. (1c)), we assume that the PP *avec X* undergoes obligatory topicalization/extraposition. This is consistent with the fact that the comitative phrase can be separated from the associate by adverbs.

- (9) **Avec lui** (hier soir) nous sommes allés au cinéma.
 With 3.M.SG (yesterday night) 1.PL be.1.PL gone to-the movie theater.
I-reading: I went to the movie theater with him yesterday night.

Lastly, we assume that the main subject DP, which includes a trace of the comitative PP t_X as well as the underlying associate Y, surfaces as a plural pronoun due to the percolation of the features of both X and Y. At the semantic level, this DP is readily interpreted as the plurality formed by the referents of X and Y.

3.3 A word on the PPC under the E-reading

The E-reading is an interpretation of the subject pronoun that does *not* include the comitative DP or pronoun, which suggests that under those readings T only agrees with the main subject. We therefore

assume, following Feldman (2001), that EPPCs are simply the result of standard adjunction of an *avec*-PP, which does not interact with T. This PP-adjunct can be merged at different levels of the structure, to appear at the beginning of the sentence, at the end, or right after the verbal complex (cf. 3).

4 Discussion

4.1 Advantages

Our account exploits an independently motivated syntactic constraint, the PCC, to explain the superiority effects witnessed in the French IPPC. In that sense, it proposes a more parsimonious solution to the pronoun hierarchy puzzle than the earlier accounts of Ladusaw (1988) or Black (1992), which had to posit additional semantic or pragmatic principles, incorporating varying amounts of syntactic information. Our account also inherits the flexibility of Deal's modeling of the PCC, which means that it could in principle extend to other languages exhibiting slightly different (e.g., strictly descending) superiority effects in their instantiation of the PPC.⁶ Finally, because our account is solely based on AGREE and person features it can also explain the agreement pattern of IPPCs involving comitative DPs (instead of pronouns), such as (2).

4.2 Further predictions

4.2.1 Inclusive vs. Exclusive readings depending on the position of the comitative phrase

Our account of the IPPC relies of a two-step agreement mechanism, obligatory followed by topicalization or extraposition. This in particular predicts that sentence-medial comitative phrases should be unambiguously VP-adjuncts, and as such should neither lead to inclusive agreement nor the inclusive reading. We think this prediction is borne out, as shown by (10): only the exclusive reading and agreement pattern (targeting the female gang without Mr. X) is possible when the comitative appears right after the verbal complex.

- (10) *Scenario: the speaker is part of an all-female gang of burglars. For a difficult operation, the gang decided to team up with a skilled male burglar, Mr. X. The speaker explains how together they sneaked into the vault of the bank.*
- a. On s'est introduites **avec lui** dans le coffre-fort.
1.PL SELF-be sneaked.F.PL with 3.M.SG in the vault
E-reading: 'We (the female gang) sneaked into the vault with X.'
- b. *On s'est introduits **avec lui** dans le coffre-fort.
1.PL SELF-be sneaked.M.PL with 3.M.SG in the vault
(Intended) I-reading: 'We (the female gang and X) sneaked into the vault.'

The prediction however, is not fully verified in the case of sentence-final comitatives. While our model predicts optionality between the E- and I-reading in that case, the I-reading in fact appears difficult to access when X is a pronoun (see (11b)), but not when it is a DP (see (11c)). Experimental evidence would be welcome to sharpen those judgments.

- (11) a. On s'est introduites dans le coffre-fort **avec lui**.
1.PL SELF-be sneaked.F.PL in the vault with 3.M.SG
E-reading: 'We (the female gang) sneaked into the vault with X.'
- b. ?On s'est introduits dans le coffre-fort **avec lui**.
1.PL SELF-be sneaked.M.PL in the vault with 3.M.SG
I-reading: 'We (the female gang and X) sneaked into the vault.'

⁶The flipside of this observation is that we in fact *should* expect languages with more or less strong superiority effects in their PPCs. In particular, we should be able to find languages with strong or "me-first" variants of the effect.

- c. On s'est introduits dans le coffre-fort **avec Monsieur X**.
 1.PL SELF-be sneaked.M.PL in the vault with Mr. X
I-reading: 'We (the female gang and X) sneaked into the vault.'

4.2.2 Syntactic and semantic signature of the complex subject DP

Besides explaining the critical superiority effects between pronouns, the IPPC structure our account derives allows to capture a set of facts noted by Feldman (2001), characteristic of IPPCs in both Russian and French.⁷ First, the comitative cannot undergo *wh*-extraction in the IPPC, while it can in the EPPC. This is shown for French in (12).

- (12) *Scenario: the addressee is part of an all-female ring of burglars. For a difficult operation, the gang decided to team up with a skilled male burglar, Mr. X. The speaker, who knows the gang teamed up with a man, inquires about his identity.*
- a. **Avec qui** vous vous êtes introduites dans le coffre-fort?
 With whom 2.PL SELF be sneaked.F.PL in the vault?
E-reading: 'Who is the (male) person s.t. you girls sneaked into the vault with him?'
- b. * **Avec qui** vous vous êtes introduits dans le coffre-fort?
 With whom 2.PL SELF be sneaked.M.PL in the vault?
(Intended) I-reading: 'Who is the (male) person s.t. you girls and this guy sneaked into the vault together?'

Under our view, the impossibility of extraction in (12b) is explained by the fact that the comitative already underwent topicalization or extraposition, freezing it for further extraction. This explanation differ from Feldman's, who did not posit movement of the PP out of the complex subject and thus attributed the impossibility of extraction to the coordinate structure constraint.

Second, the comitative pronoun or DP and the underlying associate behave as a coordinated structure in the IPPC, as evidenced by the licensing of reciprocals (13a) and the interpretation of distributive predicates (13b-13c). This is also consistent with our account, in which Y and t_X are part of the complex subject DP.

- (13) a. Avec lui vous vous aimez l'un l'autre.
 With 3.M.SG 2.PL SELF like each other.
 He and you like each other.
- b. Avec elle vous croyez en Dieu.
 With 3.F.SG 2.PL believe in God.
 She and you (each) believe in God.
- c. Avec lui on a gagné 3 euros.
 With 3.M.SG 1.PL have won 3 euros
 He earned 3 euros and I earned 3 euros

4.3 An issue with Pronoun Weakness?

The definition of the PCC generally restricts the phenomenon to phonologically "weak" elements, such as clitics, agreement markers, and weak pronouns. This claim is supported in French by the possibility to repair (Strong) PCC violations in ditransitives *via* the use of a "tonic" dative pronoun instead of a clitic as in (14) below (Rezac (2011) a.o.).

- (14) a. * Jean **me** **lui** présentera.
 Jean 1.ACC.CL 3.DAT.CL introduce.FUT
 Intended: 'Jean will introduce me to him/her.'

⁷Feldman (2001) includes anaphor binding facts in her analysis of PPCs. We choose not to include such facts for French as anaphors in that language sometimes appear exempt from Condition A Charnavel (2017).

- b. Jean **me** présentera à **lui/elle**.
 Jean 1.ACC.CL introduce.FUT to 1.ACC
 ‘Jean will introduce me to him/her.’

In the French Plural Pronoun Construction (of the form *with pro_X pro_{X+Y} VP*), the subject *pro_{X+Y}* appears weak (Cardinaletti and Starke (1999)), but the comitative pronoun *pro_X* definitely is not, given that it has the exact same form as the PCC-repairing pronoun in (14b). Is this observation undermining our PCC-based account of the French IPPC? Deal (2022) in fact argues that PCC effects do not correlate with Pronoun Weakness. First, PCC-like restrictions seem to exist in languages in which one of the two objects is not realized in a weak form. Tlaxcala Náhuatl (and many other languages, cf. Deal (2022) for an overview) exhibits the Strong PCC, despite the absence of overt Direct Object marking on the verb. The same holds with the Weak PCC in Swahili (Riedel (2009); Deal (2015)). Second, Sheehan (2020) notes that French *faire-à* causatives exhibit the Strong PCC when the Indirect Object is explicitly “strong”, i.e., when it would rescue PCC violations in constructions such as (14b). These data can be reconciled in Deal’s framework (that we use in this paper), which unlike (Stegovec (2017); Bianchi (2006); Coon and Keine (2021) a.o.) is not dependent on morphosyntactic constraints such as cliticization.

(15) Postal’s “fancy constraint” (Postal (1989)), adapted from (Sheehan (2020))

- a. Marcel **t’** a fait épouser {***à/par**} ce médecin.
 Marcel 2.SG has made marry.INF {to/by} this doctor
 Intended: ‘Marcel had this doctor marry you.’
- b. Marcel **t’** a présenté **à** ce médecin.
 Marcel 2.SG has introduced to this doctor
 ‘Marcel presented you to this doctor.’
- c. * Marcel **te lui** a présenté.
 Marcel 2.SG 3.SG has introduced
 Intended: ‘Marcel presented you to him.’

5 Conclusion

We proposed a derivation of the I-readings in the French Plural Pronoun Construction, based on Deal’s recent account of Weak PCC effects. If this analysis is on the right track, it may constitute additional evidence that the PCC is not restricted to clitic clusters. Moreover, it would suggest that PCC strength is not only language-dependent, but also **probe-dependent**, as French is subject to the Strong PCC in the *v*-domain. An extension of this account to Russian – which according to (Vassilieva and Larson (2005)) exhibits Ultrastrong PCC effects in its PPC – would suggest the same, as Russian (from what I know), does not have PCC effects in the *v*-domain (yet may use the same particle and the same case as it does in its PPC!). Experimental evidence would be welcome to confirm the judgments (mostly introspective as of now), and in particular probe(!) the **influence of the placement of the comitative DP**.

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