

ON THE IMPACT OF FRENCH SUBJECT CLITICS ON THE INFORMATION STRUCTURE OF THE SENTENCE*

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1. *In a nutshell*

In spite of the vast amount of literature dedicated to it, the status of French subject clitics is still an unresolved issue within morpho-syntactic theory. Two main analyses have been proposed and defended over the past three decades: one advocating that French subject clitics are syntactic arguments bearing a θ -role (henceforth ‘the syntactic analysis’, cf. e.g. Kayne 1975; Rizzi 1986; Laenzlinger 1998; Belletti 1999), the other viewing such clitics as mere inflectional morphemes on the verb (henceforth ‘the morphological analysis’, cf. e.g. Jaeggli 1982; Roberge 1986; Hulk 1986; Auger 1994; Miller & Monachesi in press).

This paper will not propose arguments for or against either of these analyses. Its aim is to draw the attention to some information structure facts that have been largely ignored in the literature and that any analysis of French subject clitics should account for in a principled way. It demonstrates that in spoken French, a topic interpretation of an XP expressing the subject of the sentence is only possible when this XP cooccurs with a coindexed subject clitic. In the absence of such a clitic, the XP is shown to be obligatorily in focus and is therefore argued to appear in the canonical subject position.

2. *Introduction and background*

Two factors come into play in the analysis of the string ‘XP_{*i*} - subject clitic_{*i*}’, (as exemplified in (2)):

- (1) a. the locus where the clitic is generated
- b. the syntactic position occupied by the XP

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- (2) *Les clitiques_i, ils_i comptent pour du beurre?*
 the clitics they count for some butter
 “Don’t clitics count?”

The subject clitic can be analysed as a syntactic entity (i.e. an element available for syntactic operations) to which a θ -role has been assigned and which has transited via the canonical [spec,TP] subject position, from where it has cliticised phonologically on the verb (e.g. Belletti 1999); alternatively, the subject clitic can be considered as an agreement morpheme generated directly on the finite verb (e.g. Auger 1994).

An XP expressing the subject in spoken French can either appear in the canonical subject position or in a peripheral position allowing a topic interpretation. This is illustrated in (3a) and (3b) respectively.¹

- (3) a. [CP [TP XP [T' ...]]] Canonical subject position
 b. [CP XP ... [TP [T' ...]]] Topic position

The latter possibility must be acknowledged under either analysis of subject clitics at least in cases where an element intervenes between the XP and the clitic, thereby indicating that the XP cannot be in [spec,TP] in such cases. Examples include cases like (4a), where the XP expressing the subject precedes a fronted *wh*-word and cases like (4b), where the XP expressing the subject of the embedded clause appears in the left-periphery of the matrix clause.

- (4) a. *Et la clé_i, où elle_i est?*
 and the key where she is
 “And where’s the key?”
 b. *La clé_i, je pense qu’ elle_i est restée dehors.*
 the key I think that she is stayed outside
 “I think the key’s stayed outside.”

¹ I am abstracting away from the question of whether CP consists of several layers of projections. As explained in section 3, the XP in (3b) will be taken to be adjoined to either TP (possibly as in (i)) or CP (as in (4)).

- (i) *Tu crois que les autres_i, ils_i aimeraient ça?*
 you think that the others they would-like that

Given the remarks above, the combination of the two factors in (1) yield three viable possibilities for the analysis of the string ‘ XP_i - subject clitic_{*i*}’ (excluding the possibility of coexistence of both elements in the canonical subject position, which is ruled out by the Subcategorisation Principle—Chomsky 1965). These possibilities are spelled out in (5).

- (5) a. $[_{CP} XP_i \dots [_{TP} clitic_i [_{T'} \dots]]]$
 b. $[_{CP} \dots [_{TP} XP_i [_{T'} clitic_i + T \dots]]]$
 c. $[_{CP} XP_i \dots [_{TP} e [_{T'} clitic_i + T \dots]]]$

Option (5a) corresponds in essence to the analysis of e.g. Kayne (1975); Rizzi (1986); Laenzlinger (1998); Belletti (1999), prior to phonological cliticisation of the clitic. It is the only possibility allowed under the assumption that subject clitics are syntactic entities. Option (5b) corresponds in essence to the analysis of e.g. Jaeggli (1982); Roberge (1986); Hulk (1986); Auger (1994). Under the morphological analysis of subject clitics, the possibility of option (5-c) (and not just (5b)) has to be acknowledged, on the grounds that a dislocation of the XP is possible (given the existence of structures such as those in (4)).

I will argue on interpretive grounds that, contrary to what is standardly assumed by the proponents of the morphological analysis of subject clitics, option (5b) never arises in spoken French (or at least not in its most widely spoken varieties across Belgium, France and Quebec).²

3. *Distributional restrictions*

It is well established that peripheral XP s resumed by an element within the sentence are interpreted as the topic of that sentence (see e.g. Gundel 1975; Larsson 1979; Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1981, 1994). The most widely accepted definition of topic (which I will adopt here) is that proposed by Reinhart (1981) as *what the sentence is about* (hence the term *aboutness topic*). In De Cat (2002), I argue that peripheral topics are dislocated by base-generated adjunction to a sentential maximal projection (TP or CP). I will therefore refer to the peripheral XP s that occupy us here as *dislocated phrases*.³ The observation above can be rephrased as (6), as has been argued for spoken French in De Cat (2002).

² For a discussion of how to define spoken French, see De Cat (2002), where it is also argued that ‘Advanced French’ (whose existence was postulated by Zribi-Hertz 1994) does not correspond to any attestable variety of spoken French.

³ Note however that the argumentation in this paper is equally compatible with a feature-driven analysis of peripheral topics, e.g. à la Rizzi (1997).

- (6) Only possible topics can be dislocated in spoken French.

A number of researchers (such as Roberge 1990; Auger 1994; Zribi-Hertz 1994) have taken examples like (7) to indicate that, in dialects allowing such a sentence, subject clitics cannot be syntactic entities bearing a θ -role. Instead, they argue, they are a kind of agreement morpheme on the verb. This depends on the assumption that indefinites like *un enfant* ‘a child’ in (7) cannot receive a topic interpretation.

- (7) *Un enfant_i il_i arrive pi il te pose une question.*
 a child he arrives then he to-you asks a question
 “A child arrives and he asks you a question.” (Auger 1994)

The reasoning behind such a statement is as follows: (i) If subject clitics are syntactic entities, any XP coindexed with one such clitic must appear outside of the canonical subject position (by virtue of the Subcategorisation Principle). (ii) Dislocated XPs are obligatorily interpreted as the topic of the sentence. Therefore, if the subject clitic in (7) is a syntactic entity, the coindexed *un enfant* ‘a child’ must be dislocated. (iii) But indefinites cannot be topics, so a dislocation analysis of *un enfant* ‘a child’ is impossible. (iv) Therefore the sentence in (7) is representative of a (dialectal) variety of French in which subject clitics are not arguments. (v) The only alternative is that such elements are morphemes in T in that (dialectal) variety.

This reasoning is based on that in Rizzi (1986). However, what is often overlooked by Rizzi’s followers is that indefinites *per se* are not banned as topics: it is only under their existential reading that they are incompatible with a topic interpretation. Under a generic reading, indefinites can be topics (Côté 2001). And the sentence in (7) is precisely one that receives a generic interpretation: this sentence is not about a particular child, but about a behaviour that is typical of children in general. If a specific reading is forced (by using a past tense, as illustrated in (8)), this sentence is no longer acceptable for speakers of the main varieties of spoken French (including speakers of Canadian French, to one of whom the sentence in (7) is attributed).

- (8) **Un enfant, il est arrivé pi il t’ a posé une question.*
 a child he is arrived then he to-you has asked a question

In section 4, I demonstrate that in spoken French, a heavy (i.e. non-weak) element expressing the subject is interpreted as a topic *only if* it is

resumed by a subject clitic. The presence of a subject clitic in (7) is therefore not only possible but obligatory (which turns the argument of Auger and others on its head).

4. *The presence of a subject clitic forces the topic interpretation of a coindexed XP*

Three arguments are presented below to demonstrate that in spoken French, the presence of a subject clitic has a direct impact on the information structure of that sentence. In particular, the XP can only receive a focus reading in the absence of a coindexed clitic (first and second arguments) and the XP can only be interpreted as the topic in the presence of a coindexed clitic (third argument).

4.1. *First argument: availability of a focus reading of the XP*

The focus is traditionally understood as the most informative part of a sentence (Rochemont 1986). It can be restricted to the subject, as in (9) (as a marked option — cf. Cinque 1993 and Reinhart 1996). The focus here is in capitals, indicating stress prominence.

- (9) Q: *Who's eaten my porridge?*
 A: *GOLDILOCKS has.*

In (9), only the subject conveys new information (which is also clear from the fact that the VP has been elided).

Dislocated DPs cannot be focused. They cannot convey the answer to a *wh*question. This is illustrated for dislocated objects in (10).

- (10) Q: *Qu'est-ce qu'il a senti?*
 "What did he smell?"
 A: [*LA CHAIR FRAICHE*]_i, *il *(l'_i) a senti(e).*
 the flesh fresh he it has smelled

If an XP coindexed with a(n adjacent) subject clitic allows for a focus interpretation of that XP, it implies that the XP in question is not dislocated, and hence that it occupies the canonical subject position (yielding a structure like (5b) rather than (5a)). To test whether such an option is allowed in spoken French, a judgement elicitation task was carried out on 14 native speakers from Belgium, Canada and France. The informants were presented

with 18 contexts (including 9 distractors), each with three possible follow-ups (pre-recorded on CD, with no transcription provided). The prosody of the sequences ‘XP_i - subject clitic_i’ was intended to be as close as humanly possible to that of the corresponding construction without clitic (so as to avoid prompting a dislocation analysis of that XP). Each set of possible follow-ups contained one sentence with an XP subject and no coindexed clitic, one sentence with an XP subject coindexed with an adjacent subject clitic, and one clearly unacceptable distractor (either completely inappropriate in the context in question, or clearly ungrammatical in any variety of spoken French). The contexts all forced a focus interpretation of the subject. In the illustration below, C stands for context and F for follow-up. The distractor has been omitted here.

- (11) C: *Qui a fini son travail?*
 who has finished his work
 “Who’s finished their work?”

F: (i) *CEUX DU GROUPE A ils ont fini leur travail.*
 those of-the group A they have finished their work
 “Those of the group A have finished their work.”

(ii) *CEUX DU GROUPE A ont fini leur travail.* ←
 those of-the group A have finished their work
 “Those of the group A have finished their work.”

The option where the XP expressing the subject is resumed by a clitic was accepted only 4.7% of the time (corresponding to 6/126 answers — distractors excluded), randomly across speakers and across dialects. Each speaker accepted at most one instance of ‘XP_i - subject clitic_i’ over the whole test (i.e. out of the 9 test conditions). Most speakers rejected all such configurations in the context provided, which forced a focus interpretation of the XP.⁴ The 6 answers above can thus be treated as noise in the data.

These results are consistent with a dislocation analysis of the XP coindexed with an adjacent subject clitic: dislocated XPs are topics and topics can by definition not be focused (see e.g. Erteschik-Shir 1997).

⁴ The informants were allowed to choose more than one option, as long as they indicated which option they preferred. Yet in almost all cases they only allowed one option.

4.2. *Second argument: variable binding*

Zubizarreta (1998:11) argues that in several languages (including French, English and Spanish), a QP object *each/every N* may bind a variable contained within the subject if and only if the subject is focused. In spoken French, the binding of a quantifier in the subject position (as in (12)) is only possible in the absence of a resumptive clitic.

- (12) *Sa_i mère (*elle) accompagnera chaque enfant_i.*
 his mother she will-accompany each child
- (13) *Il faut encore décider qui rentrera chaque cheval au box.*
 “We still need to decide who till take each horse to its box.”
- a. *Son jockey, il ramènera chaque cheval.*
 its jockey he will-take-back each horse
- b. *Son jockey ramènera chaque cheval.* ←
 its jockey will-take-back each horse

Not all of my 14 informants allowed the variable in the subject position to be bound by the distributive object QP (hence rejecting a wide-scope interpretation of the object). Those who did allow such a binding almost categorically rejected sentences where the DP containing the variable was resumed by a(n adjacent) subject clitic. Out of 28 expected responses (i.e. testing two such sentences), 9 were blank (indicating the impossibility of a wide-scope reading of the object) and only 1/19 corresponded to the string ‘DP_i - subject clitic_i’. That speaker abstained from providing a judgement for the other test sentence, which suggests that she only allowed marginally for a distributive object QP to bind a variable in subject position.

Again, these results are consistent with a dislocation analysis of XPs resumed by a subject clitic: such XPs cannot be focused because they are topics.

4.3. *Third argument: availability of a topic interpretation of the XP*

Not all sentences can take an aboutness topic (as defined in section 3). Whether this is possible depends on the information structure of the sentence. One of the key factors to that respect is the span of the focus, i.e. how much of the sentence is new information. In certain contexts, all the information conveyed by the sentence is new. Such sentences are said to be *thetic* as opposed to categorical. Thetic sentences describe a state of affairs and are typically uttered to answer a question like *What happened?*. Contrary to categorical sentences, they do not predicate something about a referent whose existence is presupposed: their subject is not an aboutness topic. Imagine a situation in which person A sees person B in tears, prompting the following exchange:

(14) A: *Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?*
 "What happened?"

B: *Les voisins_i (#, ils_i) ont mangé mon lapin.*
 the neighbours (they) have eaten my rabbit
 "The neighbours have eaten my rabbit."

In that context, the referent of *les voisins* "the neighbours" is not established, so that referent is not available as a sentence topic. B's response has to describe a state of affairs; it consists entirely of new information and does not permit the presence of a subject clitic (as indicated by the # in the glosses).

What is interesting for our present purpose is that certain predicates can never appear in thetic sentences. Such predicates belong to a (relatively uniform) class defined as *Individual Level Predicates* (Milsark 1974). Individual Level Predicates (henceforth ILPs) generally express (permanent) properties of individuals or types.⁵

(15) A: *Ta soeur, elle est musicienne.*
 your sister she is musician
 "Your sister's a musician."

⁵ Things are more complex than I am suggesting in the text. For an in-depth discussion of the properties of ILPs, see Jäger (2001).

- B: *MON FRERE AUSSI est musicien.*
 my brother too_F is musician
 “My brother’s a musician too.”

If a topic interpretation is only allowed in the presence of a resumptive clitic in spoken French, one can therefore expect that ILPs will always take a subject clitic, except when there is a narrow focus on the subject. This prediction was confirmed by the analysis of a corpus of spontaneous language production from 12 adult speakers of French (from various regions of Belgium, Canada and France): out of a random sample of 4030 clauses from the York and Cat corpora,⁶ ILPs did not appear without a subject clitic, except in the rare instances requiring a narrow focus reading on the subject. Examples of both types are given in (16).

- (16)a. *La cuisine, c’ est le lieu où Maman fait à manger.*
 the kitchen it is the place where Mum makes to eat
 “The kitchen is the place where Mum cooks.”
- b. *Luc aussi a les yeux de son père?*
 Luc too has the eyes of his dad
 “Luc too has his dad’s eyes?”

The quasi-obligatory presence of a subject clitic with ILPs is a direct consequence of fact that the subject of ILPs is interpreted as a topic (except when it is in narrow focus).

4.4. *On the pervasiveness of subject clitics in spoken French*

It is sometimes argued that the string ‘XP_i - subject clitic_i’ cannot possibly require a topic interpretation in all cases, given that it occurs in such a high proportion of sentences in corpora of spontaneous production (e.g. Auger 1994:116). However, one has to bear in mind that crosslinguistically, the topic strongly tends to coincide with the grammatical subject of the sentence (see e.g. Gundel 1975; Givón 1976; Li & Thompson 1976; Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1994). Such a high proportion of subject topics is therefore

⁶ The York corpus was collected under the direction of Bernadette Plunkett (ESRC grant #R000 22 1972), who has kindly allowed me to use it. The Cat corpus was collected for my doctoral research, which was funded by ESRC grant R00429834373. Details on transcription and coding procedures as well as recording conditions and speakers can be found in De Cat (2002).

entirely expected.

What has been overlooked in the literature is that French subject clitics, while very frequent, are not omnipresent. A claim such as (17) (or at least its second part) is unwarranted.

- (17) *Subject markers are true agreement markers and are thus expected to show up on every finite verb* (Auger 1994:93)

Under (17), the absence of subject clitic is predicted to be random, or speaker-dependent (as suggested by Auger 1994:13).

Yet, as this section has demonstrated, subject clitics are obligatorily absent in spoken French when the XP expressing the subject is in focus (i.e. when it is in narrow focus or when the sentence isthetic).

Data reported by Auger herself actually corroborate what has been argued in this paper. The Montreal speakers she studies only ‘double’ their subject with a clitic 70% of the time, which means that the subject clitic is absent in 30% of cases. What would have to be shown is that in those cases, the subject is in focus. I regard as highly significant the fact that the only example quoted in Auger (1994) in which *personne* ‘nobody’ is the subject does not contain a subject clitic:

- (18) *Personne la lisent la revue.* (Auger 1994:46)
 nobody it read the magazine
 ‘Nobody reads the magazine.’

This is exactly what should be expected under the present analysis, given that *personne* ‘nobody’ cannot be a topic, as it does not correspond to an identifiable discourse referent.⁷

Interestingly, one of the main proponents of the morphological analysis of clitics (Roberge 1990:54) argues that quantifiers and indefinites cannot be doubled by a subject clitic in the language varieties he studied (which he claims are representative of Quebec French). This corroborates the present analysis.

⁷ A possible exception to this would be if *personne* ‘nobody’ refers to ‘nobody out of a set defined in the discourse context’. The contexts are generally not given in Auger (1994).

5. *Information structure and syntactic structure*

5.1. *The information structure import of subject clitics*

The evidence presented so far indicates that in spoken French, an XP coindexed with an adjacent subject clitic is obligatorily interpreted as a topic. For a focus interpretation of the XP to obtain, the subject clitic must be absent.

Under a syntactic analysis of subject clitics, the topic interpretation of the XP follows directly from the syntactic structure of the sentence. That XP is obligatorily dislocated whenever there is a subject clitic because it cannot occupy the canonical subject position (since it is occupied by the clitic). The resulting dislocated structure (given in (5a)) is syntactically transparent to what ErteschikShir (1997) calls f(ocus)-structure, the grammatical level where the scope of topic and focus is defined and which mediates between syntax and PF / LF. At f-structure, the topic has to take scope over the rest of the sentence. The information structure contrast between sentences with and without subject clitic is thus accounted for straightforwardly.

Under a morphological analysis of subject clitics, the topic interpretation of the XP expressing the subject is not forced to follow from the presence of a subject clitic, unless such clitics are endowed with special properties. One can for instance imagine a mechanism that would force the presence of a pro in the canonical subject position whenever there is a subject clitic. Subject clitics could (perhaps in addition to that) be argued to be topic markers (e.g. by endowing them with a topic feature). This would account for the fact that such clitics are only realised when the subject is interpreted as topic. An interesting consequence would be the blurring of the distinction between topics and pronoun-like elements (at least those associated with the subject): if subject clitics bear a topic feature, any sentence with such a clitic would force a topic interpretation of the subject (i.e. in (19a) as well as (19b)). This idea is compatible with the claim that topics can be covert (cf. e.g. Gundel 1975).

- (19) a. *Tim_i, il_i a retrouvé ses framboisiers.*
 Tim he has retrieved his raspberrycanes
 “Tim has got his raspberrycanes back.”

- b. *Il a retrouvé ses framboisiers.*
 he has retrieved his raspberrycanes

Note that under such an analysis, French subject clitics would not be mere agreement morphemes but would have a nontrivial information structure status. This would account for the obligatory absence of subject clitic in sentences like (20) — which remains unexplained under current versions of the morphological analysis of French subject clitics.

- (20) a. *Qui_i (*il_i) veut du gouda ?*
 who he wants some goudacheese
- b. *Quels soldats_i (*ils_i) sont partis ?*
 which soldiers they are left (i.e. have left)

5.2. Prosodic evidence for the dislocation of the coindexed XP

Irrespective of whether the information structure import of the subject clitic is due to an inherent feature or to its argumental status, there are good reasons to consider that the XP coindexed with such a clitic is dislocated in all cases.

First, as pointed out in the introduction, that XP is clearly dislocated at least when an element intervenes between it and the clitic (as shown by examples (4a) and (4b)).

Second, the prosodic characteristics of that XP indicate that it is dislocated even in the absence of intervening material. This has been argued for Quebec French by Deshaies, Guilbault, & Paradis (1993) and Guilbault (1993) and by myself for varieties of Canadian and European French (De Cat 2002). Contrary to what is often assumed, the decisive criterion in identifying left-dislocation prosody is not the presence of a pause between the XP in question and the rest of the sentence, but a combination of factors of which the most important are the presence of stress (i.e. increased intensity) on the last syllable of the dislocated element, and pitch (i.e. melodic) prominence on that syllable, as compared with the pitch of what follows the dislocated element.⁸

⁸ Space restrictions prevent me from going into much detail. For a definition of Intonation Group and the importance of this notion for the prosodic analysis of French left-dislocation, see Mertens, Goldmann, Wehrli, & Gaudinat (2001).

6. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that in the most widely spoken varieties of French, subject clitics can only appear when the subject is interpreted as the topic of the sentence and are banned whenever the subject is in focus. Prosodic evidence also suggests that an XP coindexed with a subject clitic is always dislocated in spoken French. This suggests that the following structure never arises in spoken French: $[_{CP} XP_i \dots [_{TP} e [_{T'} \text{clitic}_i + T \dots]]]$.

Any analysis of French subject clitics, whether or not it endows them with argument status, has to provide a principled explanation for these facts.

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