# The meaning and use of the French c'est-cleft.

In this paper, I provide experimental evidence for three important facts about the meaning and function of the French c'est-cleft: First, despite being associated with an exhaustive inference, exhaustivity is not part of the truth-conditional meaning of the cleft (ex 1). Second, French speakers do not consistently use clefts to mark focus. Finally, some factors such as (a) the form of the previous question (ex 2) and (b) the interpretation of the question (ex 3) are not predicative of the cleft use. The optionality of the cleft use in certain contexts is explained through (1) a ranking of universal yet violable constraints and (2) a constraint on the common ground such that the cleft must express a proposition which signals a completed line of inquiry.

(1) C'est Marie qui mange une pomme ⊭ Seule Marie mange une pomme.
(2) Q: Qu'est-ce que Marie a acheté au kiosque?  A: Marie a acheté des cigarettes au kiosque.
(3) Q: Marie a acheté un journal au kiosque, non?  A: Non, elle a acheté des cigarettes au kiosque.

**Theoretical background**: The past literature on French focus marking strategies tends to concentrate on distinguishing different categories of clefts based on information-structural criteria. The most influential account, originating in Lambrecht (1994), proposes that there is a strict 1:1 relationship between the grammatical type of focus and its realization. Three focus types are presented: (1) argument-focus is realized via a c'est-cleft, (2) predicate-focus is realized via a dislocation and (3) sentence-focus is realized via avoir-cleft. However, more recent studies challenge this view by showing that the c'est-cleft can also be used to mark sentence-focus (Rialland et al. 2005). Some studies also suggest, still contra Lambrecht (1994), that the c'est-cleft is not always used to mark focus; Vion&Colas (1995) show that speakers use a focal accent to signal focus on complements in contrastive contexts. In this paper, I show that challenges to Lambrecht's work are indeed substantiated and provide evidence for the optionality of the output form.

The exhaustiveness effect associated with the c'est-cleft has rarely been analyzed in detail in the French literature. One exception is Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) who analyze it as truth-functional. However, data such as clefted universal quantifiers (ex 4) suffice to challenge such a claim. In this paper, I provide evidence that the exhaustivity in the c'est-cleft is of a different nature than the exhaustivity in exclusive sentences.

(4) Ce sont tous les citoyens qui font l'objet d'une discrimation.

**Experiment 1**: The first experiment settles that the exhaustive inference associated with the French c'est-cleft is not part of the at issue meaning of the cleft. The experiment is based on the intuition that (5a) is not pragmatically correct, but (5b) is.
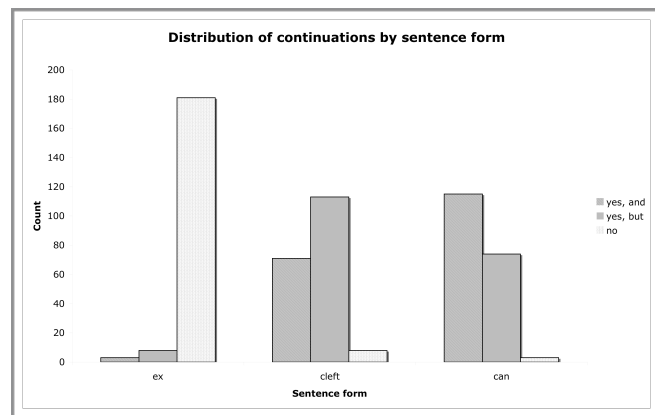
(5a) # C'est Jean qui est tombé dans les escaliers et Paul aussi.
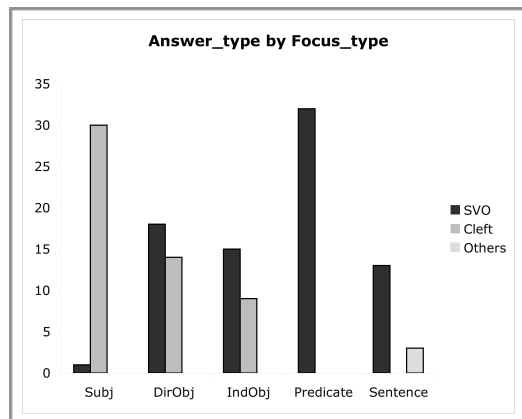
(5b) A: C'est Jean qui est tombé dans les escaliers.
    B: Oui, et Paul aussi.

25 French native speakers were confronted to written stimuli in the form of a question/ answer pairs. The answers appeared in three conditions: a) an exclusive sentence, b) a cleft construction and c) a canonical sentence. The task was for the participants to choose from one of the following continuations: a) Oui, et Paul est aussi tombé, b) Oui, mais Paul est aussi tombé ou c) Non, Paul est aussi tombé.



Distribution of continuations by sentence form

The results in Fig1 (below) show that a sentence containing a cleft is not semantically exhaustive like an exclusive sentence, but is more exhaustive than a canonical sentence. Indeed, participants choose

to overtly contradict (Non, ...) an exclusive sentence 93% of the time but only 6% of the time with a cleft and a mere 2% for the canonical.

**Experiment 2**: The semi-spontaneous data presented in this second experiment comes from a pilot study conducted on 6 French native speakers. The study is an elicited production task aiming to depict the strategy speakers use in the expression of semantically different focus types. The participants were presented with two short stories composed of two pictures each, and were subsequently asked various questions targeting different information-structural readings. Speakers were asked to avoid answering with a single constituent but to otherwise feel free regarding the phrasing of their answer. Three factors and their respective effect on the strategy used were examined: (1) grammatical function of the focus element (subject, object, predicate and sentence), (2) form of the question that prompted the answer (clefted and non-clefted) and (3) the interpretation imposed by the context (neutral and contrastive). Results show, contra Lambrecht (1994), that French speakers do not consistently use a c'est-cleft to mark argument focus on objects (either direct or indirect). Moreover, results show that speakers do not consistently use a c'est-cleft in contrastive contexts as claimed in Vion & Colas (1995).

**Answer_type by Focus_type**

Legend: SVO, Cleft, Others

Categories: Subj, DirObj, IndObj, Predicate, Sentence

**Discussion and Analysis**: From a theoretical perspective, the data suggest that (1) exhaustivity is not an invariant in the c'est-cleft and (2) the c'est-cleft is not an invariant to mark focus, even on arguments. Both findings are in line with several recent experimental results in other languages like English, German, Hungarian and Spanish (Zimmerman 2009, Onea&Beaver 2009, Gabriel 2010).

In opposition with the general trend in the French literature, I propose a unified account of the meaning and use of the c'est-cleft based on two components: (a) interacting, universal yet violable constraints in the OT framework and (b) a constraint on the context such that the hearer must assume that the common ground and the question under discussion are such that, in that context, the semantic value of the c'est-cleft totally resolves and terminates the inquiry raised by the question under discussion. In line with past OT accounts on focus marking (Keller&Alexopoulou 2001), I present how the following set of general constraints on information structure, markedness and faithfulness interacts to account for the optionality observed in Experiment 2:

    (6) CANONICAL: Word order must be Subject, Verb, Object.

    (7) F(OCUS)P(ROMINENCE): Any maximally communicatively significant constituent in the input must be realized prominently in the output.

    (8) ACCENTALIGN: Accent must fall on the rightmost constituent of the phrase.

    (9) FAITHSYN(TAX): Do not insert any element that does not appear in the input.

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