



Chapitre de livre

2019

Accepted version

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How to cite

ROY, Isabelle, SHLONSKY, Ur. Aspects of the syntax of "ce" in French copular sentences. In: Copulas across languages. Arche, M. ; Fabrégas, A. & Marín, R. (Ed.). New York : Oxford University Press, 2019. p. 153–169. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780198829850.003.0008

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:114673>

Publication DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198829850.003.0008](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198829850.003.0008)

Aspects of the syntax of *ce* in French copular sentences

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Abstract

We develop a structural account of the distribution of the expletive pronoun *ce* in French copular sentences. Assuming that copular sentences are derived from an asymmetrical PredP small clause, we argue that the functional domain of the clause involves two distinct ‘high’ subject positions, with *ce* occupying the lower of the two.

In our view, *ce* is merged whenever an agreement relationship fails to be established between the ‘thematic’, contentful subject and an element from the PredP bearing active, interpretable phi-features. The sources of the agreement failure are diverse, and we consider two in detail. What the two have in common is that they force the movement of the subject into the higher of the two subject positions, yielding its particular interpretive properties (i.e., presuppositional / generic but not existential).

Keywords: copula, copular construction, French, *ce*

1. Introduction

French copular sentences are constructed with the verb *être* ‘be’ which may or may not be preceded by a pronominal *ce*. In some cases, *ce + être* alternates with *être* alone, as in (1). In other cases, only *ce+être* is possible and *être* alone is excluded, as exemplified by (2).

(1) Jean (c’)est mon meilleur ami.
Jean (CE).is my best friend
'Jean is my best friend.'

(2) a. Mon meilleur ami *(c’)est Jean.
my best friend (CE).is Jean
'My best friend is Jean.'

b. Ce que j’aime chez toi *(c’)est ton regard.
CE that I like about you (CE).is your gaze
'What I like about you is your gaze.'

c. L’étoile du matin *(c’)est l’étoile du soir.
the.star of+the morning (CE).is the.star of+the evening
'The morning star is the evening star.'

The pronominal *ce* found in copular sentences is a ‘weak’ form which does not alternate with the strong demonstratives *ça/cela*: **Jean ça/cela est mon ami*. Its distribution in copular sentences is important for the understanding of the syntax of predication in French. This chapter offers a novel account of the syntax of *ce*.

Part of the issue is to correctly characterize the distribution of *ce*. Many accounts in the literature are based on Higgins' (1973) well-known classification of copular sentences into *equatives* ('The morning star is the evening star'), *identificational* ('This is John'), *specificational* ('What I like about John is his tie') and *predicational* ('John is sick'). For Amary-Coudreau (2014; 2012; 2010), *ce* is obligatory in the first three types of copular sentences while excluded in *predicational* ones.

However, we take the existence of clearly predicational sentences in which *ce+être* occur to the exclusion of *être* alone, as in (3), to argue against such an account. It is implausible that sentences such as (3) express anything but a predicative relation of the type *green(vegetables)* and *soft(cats)*, respectively:

- (3) a. Les légumes *(c')est vert.
 the vegetables (CE).is green
 'Vegetables are green.'
- b. Un chat *(c')est doux.
 a cat (CE).is soft
 'Cats are soft.'

Another concern comes from example (1), both variants of which seem to belong to the same type in Higgins' notional classification, independently of the presence of the proform *ce*. This is also true for some clearly predicative sentences:

- (4) Jean (c')est un beau mec.
 Jean (CE).is a handsome guy
 'Jean is a handsome guy.'

We have additional independent reasons for rejecting Higgins' typology as an explanatory classification. Those relate more directly to the definition of the types themselves and we will mention them here to the extent that they lead us to drastically different assumptions regarding the basic predicative relationship in copular sentences.

Let us consider each *nonpredicational* type in turn. So-called *equatives* are defined as stating an identity relation between two referential expressions ($A=B$; $B=A$). However, both members of the putative equation relate differently to the common-ground so that the sentences *A is B* and *B is A* have different information structures. For instance, so-called equatives in belief reports are not identity statements, as *Mary thinks that you are me but she doesn't think that I am you* is not a contradiction (Cumming 2008; Percus & Sharvit 2014). If we assume that there is a structural counterpart to the asymmetrical informational contents of so-called equatives, we are led to conclude, with Percus & Sharvit (2014), that they are syntactically represented by an asymmetrical structural relationship between the two terms.

Turning to *specificational* (non pseudocleft) sentences, we assume, following a long line of authors, that they are inverted sentences in which the predicative NP appears in sentence initial position (Moro 1997 and Heycock 2012, among others). We will not comment on the *identificational* type, which is certainly the least well defined of the four.

What is important here is that so-called equatives, specificational and predicational sentences all involve an asymmetrical relationship between two elements. We assume a structural source for the asymmetry in copular sentences: All copular constructions derive from a uniform underlying asymmetric 'small clause' structure (den Dikken 2006; Roy 2013). By assumption, we take this small clause to be headed by a functional head Pred, following Bowers (1993) and Svenonius (1994).

The major thrust of our contribution is to argue that the distribution of *ce* is structurally conditioned.

2. The canonical copular construction

(5) is a copular sentence in which the nominal appearing to the left of the copula corresponds to the subject of predication. The nominal on the copula's right is the predicate nominal. Following Moro (1997), we term the word order in (5) *canonical*.

- (5) Jean est mon meilleur ami.
Jean is my best friend

Starting from (6)a, *est* 'is' is merged, (6)b, and then the full-clause functional structure, indicated by three dots in (6)c. Finally, the PredP subject - *Jean* in (5) - raises to the clausal subject position, (6)d, which we take to be Spec/Subj (Cardinaletti 2004, Rizzi 2006, Rizzi and Shlonsky 2007), further discussed below.

- (6) a. [PredP Jean [Pred [mon meilleur ami]]]
 b. est [PredP Jean [Pred [mon meilleur ami]]]
 c. ... est [PredP Jean [Pred [mon meilleur ami]]]
 d. Jean ... est [_{PredP} Jean [Pred [mon meilleur ami]]]

Canonical copular sentences in French can also appear with the pronoun *c(e)* in-between the pre-copular nominal and the copula.

- (7) Jean c'est mon meilleur ami.
Jean CE.is my best friend

The interpretive difference between (5) and (7) is not semantic, that is, truth-conditional, but informational: The post-copular nominal in (7) is focalized (Amary-Coudreau 2012), and, consequently, the pre-copular one is interpreted as part of the presupposition. The answer to a question such as (8) can only be (9)a, with *ce*, and not (9)b, without *ce*, as indicated by the asterisk.

- (8) Q: Qui est Jean?
who is Jean

- (9) A: a. Jean c'est mon meilleur ami.
Jean CE.is my best friend

- b. *Jean est mon meilleur ami.

Jean is my best friend

Moreover, it is invariably the *post*-copular nominal that is in focus; the pre-copular DP cannot be interpreted as new-information focus (although it may be interpreted as a contrastive focus). Hence, while (10) is a perfectly grammatical *inverse* copular sentence, further discussed below, it cannot be used to answer (8), since it involves a reversal of the requisite focal configuration: the pre-copular 'my best friend' is the (new information) answer to 'who' and the post-copular 'Jean' is old, presupposed information.

(10) A: **Mon meilleur ami c'est Jean.*
my best friend CE.is Jean

We thus conclude that the focus-presupposition configuration is syntactically encoded in French *ce* copular sentences and turn to the following questions:

- How is this focal configuration derived?
- Why is *ce* required in such sentences?

Although focus can certainly be borne by constituents in situ in French (perhaps followed by covert movement, Chomsky (1976) and signaled by a high pitch), the fact that focus is rigidly associated with the post-copular position of *ce* sentences leads us to believe that it is not a freely-assigned feature 'subject to rules of construal' but is encoded in the structure.

One possibility is that the syntax of copular sentences such as (7) makes use of the 'low' focus position in the left periphery of VP/vP, which Belletti (2001, 2004) argues to house postverbal subjects in Italian (and pivots of some clefts - Belletti (2015).) This is the approach taken in Rizzi (2015a) to explain post-copular focalization in inverse copular constructions in Italian (and extended to Hebrew in Shlonsky & Rizzi (to appear)). We adopt this perspective in this contribution and suggest extending it to French copular sentences with *ce*.

The initial PredP structure of (7) is the same as that of (5), namely (6)a. After merge of 'be' in (6)b, a Focus head is merged and the complement of PRED, namely *mon meilleur ami* in (7), is moved to its specifier, as in (11).¹

(11) [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] FOC [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [_{DP} ~~mon meilleur ami~~]]]]]

Subsequent merge of the subject-attracting functional head SUBJ cannot be followed by raising of the subject, for otherwise (7) would end up like (5), with neither focus on the post-copular DP nor *ce*.

Consider (12), which schematizes the derivation of (7) at the point at which SUBJ is merged.

¹ *Est* 'is' is positioned in T in (11) and in subsequent examples. We leave open the question of whether it is moved to T from the VP or whether it is externally merged there.

(12) SUBJ [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] FOC [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [PRED [~~DP~~ mon meilleur ami]]]]]

Assume that SUBJ has unvalued phi features (which end up on the verbal morphology, perhaps because V moves to SUBJ) and initiates a search for valued phi features. The closest candidate for agreement with SUBJ, in terms of c-command, is the predicate nominal *mon meilleur ami* in Spec/Foc. Can an Agree relation be licitly established between SUBJ and the phi features of the focused nominal? In principle, those features should be accessible to the SUBJ probe, but French imposes an EPP requirement on its phi-bearing heads. In other words, agreement in this language requires movement of the agreement goal to the specifier of the probe, in addition to the pure feature-matching of Agree.

We argue that Spec/Foc is a criterial position - in the sense of Rizzi (2006) and subsequent work. Hence, the nominal *mon meilleur ami* is criterially-frozen there and cannot move to Spec/SUBJ.

We can observe the impact of criterial freezing on the post-*ce* nominal in Spec/Foc in (13)a with *wh*-movement. Movement of the complement of Pred, in (13)b, is unhampered, since it is not criterially-frozen.

- (13) a. *Que penses-tu que Jean c'est ___?
what do you think that Jean CE.is
- b. Que penses-tu que Jean est ___?
what do you think that Jean is

In (12), then, agreement cannot be implemented, because the agreement goal is in a criterial position. SUBJ may attempt to search further down the tree and target the phi features of the (unmoved) subject of PredP, *Jean* in (12). However, *mon meilleur ami* is hierarchically closer to the probe and since it bears active phi features, can be taken to intervene (perhaps only 'defectively', in the sense of Chomsky (2000) and related work) and block this search operation. So how does SUBJ check/value its phi features? We suggest that this is accomplished by external merge of the pronominal *ce*, which becomes Spec/Subj.

Under this approach, *ce* is an expletive but it differs from French's other expletive *il* in that it lacks a movement-accessible associate. Typical expletive-associate pairs mimic movement chains and involve some kind of relation, expressed through e.g., coindexing, co-superscripting, LF replacement, or via literal chain formation, under the assumption that the expletive is moved from a 'big' DP where it forms an underlying constituent with its associate. *Ce*, by contrast, does not have an associate and is thus, a 'pure' expletive.

(12) is followed by *ce*-merge, as in (14), but a further step is still necessary in order to front the PredP subject *Jean* to a position to the left of *ce*.

(14) *ce* SUBJ [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] Foc [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [PRED [_{DP} ~~mon~~
meilleur ami]]]]]]

To understand this derivational step, we need to answer two questions. First, is the position of the pre-*ce* nominal a left-dislocated, topic position and if not, what sort of position is it? Second, how does the subject of PredP move into this clause-initial position without violating Relativized Minimality?

The pre-copular DP in (7) is interpreted as (part of) the presupposition. However, there are good reasons to believe that the position it occupies is not a left-peripheral, dislocated topic position, but one which resembles a (second) subject position.

Consider the distribution of quantifiers in pre-copular positions in French. Since quantifiers cannot be dislocated topics - the fact they are licit in the (a) examples in (15)- (18) indicates that in *ce*-less, regular copular sentences, they are subjects, not topics. In the (b) examples, they are genuine topics, resumed by a pronoun. The (b) examples are ungrammatical. In the (c) examples, the pre-*ce* DPs are ungrammatical in (15) and (16), but grammatical in (17) and (18). The (d) examples are clear cases of right dislocation, but with *ce*, they are all ungrammatical.

(15) a. *Personne* (n')est mon ami.
nobody (neg).is my friend

b. **Personne il* (n')est mon ami.
nobody he (neg).is my friend

c. **Personne ce* (n')est mon ami.
nobody CE (neg).is my friend

d. **Ce* (n')est mon ami, *personne*.
CE (neg).is my friend, nobody

(16) a. *Aucun étudiant* (n')est un génie.
no student (neg).is a genius

b. **Aucun étudiant il* (n')est un génie.
no student he (neg).is a genius

c. **Aucun étudiant ce* (n')est un génie.
no student CE (neg).is a genius

d. **Ce* (n')est un génie, *aucun étudiant*.
CE (neg).is a genius, no student

(17) a. *Chaque étudiant* est un génie potentiel.
every student is a genius potential

b. **Chaque étudiant il* est un génie potentiel.
every student he is a genius potential

- c. Chaque étudiant c'est un génie potentiel.
every student CE.is a genius potential
- d. *C'est un génie potentiel, chaque étudiant.
CE.is a genius potential, every student
- (18) a. La plupart de mes collègues sont des amis.
most of my colleagues are INDEF.PL friends
- b. *La plupart de mes collègues ils sont des amis.
most of my colleagues they are INDEF.PL friends
- c. La plupart de mes collègues c'est des amis.
most of my colleagues CE.is INDEF.PL friends
- d. *C'est des amis, la plupart de mes collègues.
CE.is INDEF.PL friends, most of my colleagues

We find the (c) examples in the paradigms in (15)-(18) particularly revealing. They illustrate not only that quantifiers are possible in the position preceding *ce* and hence that they are not dislocated topics, but crucially that only strong quantifiers are acceptable in that position. This is demonstrated by the contrast between (15) and (16) with 'nobody' and 'no student', on the one hand and (17) and (18) with the semantically strong 'each' and 'most' on the other hand.

We have argued that *ce* is in Spec/Subj, that is, in the subject position. We now see that the nominal preceding it is also a subject. This leads us to conclude that there are two subject positions in these copular constructions. The idea that the clausal subject position is not a unique position but a field of positions, each of which contributes a specific morphosyntactic and/or discourse/informational feature, was developed in early work in syntactic cartography, e.g., Cardinaletti (1997, 2004). Overt manifestations of multiple (preverbal) subjects may be the subject clitics of Northern Italian dialects, Manzini & Savoia (2005), Poletto (2000), or the co-occurrence of subjects with the “nominal copula”, labeled Pron by Doron (1983), (see Shlonsky (2000), Shlonsky & Rizzi (to appear).)

We propose that *ce* copular constructions in French also exploit two subject positions, which we henceforth label Subj1 (the lower of the two, occupied by *ce*) and Subj2, in which the nominal subject is merged (see Shlonsky & Rizzi (to appear).)

With the adoption of this nomenclature, SUBJ in (14) should be replaced by SUBJ1. Merge of *ce* is followed by merge of Subj2, leading to (19).

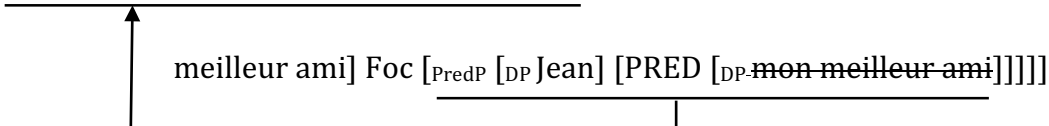
- (19) SUBJ2 *ce* SUBJ1 [TP est [FocP [DP mon meilleur ami] Foc [PredP [DP Jean] [PRED {DP ~~mon~~ meilleur ami}]]]]

In order to arrive at the word order in (7), *Jean* has to move to Spec/Subj2. But such a step of movement is illicit because the nominal *ce* in Spec/Subj1 intervenes and prevents the formation of a chain between Spec/Subj2 and Spec/PRED.²

One way of circumventing intervention is moving not the target itself, but the category enclosing it. Smuggling – as Collins (2005a, 2005b) named this strategy – has the effect of bypassing an intervener by forming a chain that fails to be blocked by it. In the abstract schema in (20), for example, XP blocks the formation of a ZP chain but is blind to YP, of which ZP simply happens to be an internal constituent. YP can be moved over ZP, *smuggling* ZP.

(20) [YP ...Y....ZP] XP [~~YP...Y....ZP~~]

Again following in the footsteps of Rizzi (2015b) and Shlonsky & Rizzi (to appear), we argue that (14) is in fact not followed by (19), but by a previous step of PredP movement so some position above *ce*, as diagrammed in (21).

(21) [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [~~_{DP} mon meilleur ami~~]]] ... *ce* SUBJ1 [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon


PredP-raising has the effect of smuggling the PredP subject *Jean* to a position above *ce*, circumventing the intervention effect that would arise if *Jean* moved alone.³ It explains why a floating quantifier associated with the clausal subject *mes amis* 'my friends' in (22)a, cannot appear in a *ce* construction, (22)b. It has been observed that floating quantifiers cannot be stranded in the base position of the subject (see e.g., Bobaljik 2003; Fitzpatrick 2006; Shlonsky 1991). This means that movement of the subject from Spec/Pred to Spec/Subj1 in (22)a, goes through an intermediate position where the quantifier can be stranded. The ungrammaticality of (22)b shows that there is no such position in the derivation of a *ce* copular sentence, as the moved constituent is PredP, not the subject DP.

² A reviewer wonders why the subject of PredP, *Jean* in (19), must move. We assume here that subjects never remain in their “first merge” position, perhaps for labeling reasons, as Chomsky (2013) suggests (see also Shlonsky 2015). An independent question is why it must move to Subj2. Assuming the presence of a “low” focus phrase in the clause (Belletti 2001, 2004), it may be that a “low” topic phrase can also be made available in “low” left periphery, below the focus phrase. Its exploitation would then give rise to sentences such as (i), with *Jean* right -dislocated.

- (i) C'est mon meilleur ami, Jean.
CE.is my best friend John
 'He's my best friend, John.'

³ The smuggling operation must target a position above *ce*. Movement of PredP prior to the merge of Subj1 might, as a reviewer points out, undermine the need to have *ce* merge to check the phi-features of Subj1. We contend, with Shlonsky and Rizzi (to appear), that although the cases of smuggling discussed by Collins (2005a, 2005b) are quite local, the operation itself – like the related ‘remnant’ movement operation – are not ‘local’ in some rule-specific sense and their scope can vary from structure to structure and from language to language.

- (22) a. Mes amis sont (tous) ma joie de vivre.
my friends are all my joie de vivre
- b. Mes amis c'est (*tous) ma joie de vivre
my friends CE.is all my joie de vivre

The word order that obtains in (21) is consistent with (7). However, a further step of movement is necessary for *Jean* to come to occupy the kind of subject position that we have argued it does. Merge of SUBJ2, as in (23), and subsequent movement of *Jean* from inside the moved PredP to Spec/Subj2, as in (24), achieve precisely this.

(23) SUBJ2 [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [_{DP} ~~mon meilleur ami~~]]] ... *ce* SUBJ1 [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] Foc [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [_{DP} ~~mon meilleur ami~~]]]]]

(24) [_{DP} Jean] SUBJ2 [_{PredP} [_{DP} ~~Jean~~] [_{PRED} [_{DP} ~~mon meilleur ami~~]]] ... *ce* SUBJ1 [_{TP} est [_{FocP} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] Foc [_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [_{DP} ~~mon meilleur ami~~]]]]]

Let us recap and conclude the analysis of canonical copular sentences proposed in this section. In such sentences, *ce* is optional. When it does not appear, the nominal in Spec/PredP is moved to the clausal subject position. It stands to reason that this "clausal subject position" is the position we have identified as Spec/Subj1 and that Subj1⁰ is the head responsible for the "aboutness" interpretation of its specifier. Subj2 is not merged in such structures.

Ce appears when the complement of PRED is moved to a low focus position and becomes frozen to further movement. In particular, it cannot move to Spec/Subj1. There is no other accessible candidate to satisfy Subj1's "EPP" requirement; the active phi features on the focused nominal block access to the PredP specifier.⁴ In these circumstances, *ce* is externally merged. But the merge of *ce* has the consequence of blocking movement of the nominal in Spec/Pred to a position higher than *ce*. Smuggling of this nominal by PredP-raising overcomes this. As a final step, the subject is moved out of the specifier position in the raised PredP and comes to occupy Spec/Subj2.

Subj2 is also an "aboutness" head, but it differs from Subj1 in that when quantifiers occupy it, they must be strong. This suggests that Subj2 is not simply a second instance of Subj1 but that it is minimally distinct from it, in terms of its feature content. It shares with Subj1 the "aboutness" feature - both (5) and (7) are *about* the pre-copular subject

⁴ Focalization of the predicate nominal without movement to Spec/FocP absolves the need to merge *ce*, because Subj1 can target the subject of PredP and attract it to its specifier. Thus, while *ce* is obligatory in (i), 'be' alone is possible in (ii) - as pointed out to us by Anne Zribi Hertz (personal communication) - where focalization is indicated by the focus-sensitive particles 'also' and 'still':

- (i) L'étoile du matin *(c')est l'étoile du soir.
the star of+the morning (CE.)is the star of the evening
 'The morning star is the evening star.'
- (ii) L'étoile du matin (c')est aussi/quand même l'étoile du soir.
the.star of+the morning (CE.)is also/still the.star of+the evening
 'The morning star is also/still the evening star.'

Rizzi's (2015) proposal, which we follow here, links the solution to the locality problem to the frequently observed fact that the post-copular nominal in inverse constructions across languages is invariably focalized (Heycock 2012).

The obligatory focalization of the post-copular nominal in inverse constructions is noted for French in Amary-Coudreau (2012) and illustrated by the question-answer sequence in (28).

(28) Q: Qui est le directeur du laboratoire?
who is the director of.the lab

A: Le directeur du laboratoire c'est Marie.
the director of.the lab CE.is Marie

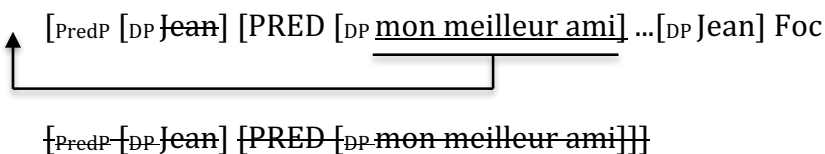
Rizzi's (2015) proposal is that focalization in inverse copular constructions *follows* from locality. In order to enable the predicate nominal to move over the subject, he envisages three stages, which we adopted with some elaboration in our discussion of canonical sentences with *ce*. The fundamental difference between the derivation of inverse sentences and of canonical ones is that focalization in the former is a required step; it eliminates the intervention of the PredP subject.

The first stage in the derivation involves movement of the subject of PredP to the focus position (ignoring 'be'):

(29) [_{DP} Jean] Foc ... [_{PredP} [_{DP} ~~Jean~~] [_{PRED} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami]]]

The second stage involves movement of PredP and smuggling of the predicate nominal to a position above FocP. Lastly, the predicate nominal *mon meilleur ami* is extracted from the smuggled PredP and moved to the subject position.

Notice that at the last stage, the copy of the previously moved specifier of PredP still intervenes in the movement path of the predicate nominal.

(30) 

[_{PredP} [_{DP} Jean] [_{PRED} [_{DP} mon meilleur ami] ... [_{DP} Jean] Foc

{_{PredP} {_{DP} Jean} {_{PRED} {_{DP} mon meilleur ami}}}

Adopting Krapova & Cinque's (2008) interpretation of relativized minimality as applying to whole chains and not to segments of chains or copies of moved elements, Rizzi argues that while the copy of *Jean* indeed c-commands *mon meilleur ami*, the chain {Jean, Jean} does not intervene, since the head of this chain is in Spec/Foc and does not c-command *mon meilleur ami*.⁵

⁵ If the smuggling operation gets a nominal high enough in the structure to be licitly attracted to Subj2, it raises the question – raised by a reviewer - of how that nominal checks Case. Two possibilities come to mind. First, we can suppose that Subj2 is endowed with a nominative Case feature which is checked in the (abstract) agreement process with Subj2. Alternatively, the nominal can be case-licensed internally to PredP.

In our approach to *ce*, (29) is followed by merge of Subj1 and then of *ce*, for reasons discussed above. PredP raises above Subj1P, then Subj2 is merged and *mon meilleur ami* is moved to its specifier. This derivation is identical to the one proposed for canonical sentences. The major difference is that focalization and hence *ce* are obligatory here, for reasons just discussed.

In both canonical and inverse sentences, *ce* is merged whenever one of the two nominals in PredP is moved to Spec/Foc, (the predicate nominal in the former, the subject in the latter). However, there is no inherent link between *ce*-merge and focalization. It just so happens that low focalization in French has the consequence of barring movement to Spec/Subj1. Our approach predicts that if Spec/Subj1 were rendered inaccessible by means other than low focalization, *ce* would also show up. We now turn to copular sentences with adjectival predicates and show that this prediction is met.

4. Predicational *ce* sentences with adjectival predicates

As mentioned in the introduction, *ce* also appears in copular sentences with an adjectival predicate, as in (31).

- (31) a. Les légumes c'est vert.
the.PL vegetable.PL CE.is green.SG
 'Vegetables are green'.
- b. Les enfants c'est bruyant.
the.PL children CE.is noisy.SG
 'Children are noisy'.
- c. La musique c'est beau.
the.SG.F music.SG.F CE.is beautiful.SG.M
 'Music is beautiful'.
- d. Le café c'est fort.
the.SG coffee.SG CE.is strong.SG
 'Coffee is (a) strong (drink)'.
- e. Un chat c'est doux.
a cat CE.is soft
 'Cats are soft'.

The occurrence of *ce* in the sentences in (31), however, does not depend on the focalization of the post-copular adjective. In fact, the pre-*ce* DP, rather than the adjective, can be interpreted as new-information focus in such sentences, as in (32).

- | | |
|---|--|
| (32) a. Q: Qu'est-ce qui est vert?
<i>what is green</i> | A: <u>Les légumes</u> c'est vert!
<i>vegetables are green</i> |
| b. Q: Qu'est-ce qui est beau dans la vie?
<i>what is beautiful in life</i> | A: <u>La musique</u> c'est beau!
<i>music is beautiful</i> |

c. Q: Qu'est-ce qui est doux, par exemple?
what is soft, for example

A: Un chat c'est doux!
cats are soft

Comparing the sentences in (31) with the variants with *be* alone and without *ce* in (33), we find that there are nevertheless sufficient reasons to motivate their integration into our account of the role and use of *ce* in French copular sentences.

- (33) a. Les légumes sont verts.
the.PL vegetables are green.PL
'(The) vegetables are green'.
- b. Les enfants sont bruyants.
the.PL children are noisy.PL
'(The) children are noisy'.
- c. La musique est belle.
the.SG music is beautiful.SG
'(The) music is beautiful'.
- d. Le café est fort.
the.SG coffee is strong.SG
'(The) coffee is strong'.

To begin with, the presence of *ce* in (31) correlates with the absence of agreement between the post-copular adjective and the pre-*ce* DP, (34)a. This sentence should be compared with one without *ce*, where agreement is obligatory; see (34)b. We have argued that *ce*, merged in Subj1, agrees with 'be'. This accounts for why 'be' is singular in (34)a and not plural. But it remains to be explained why the presence of *ce* blocks *adjectival* agreement.

- (34) a. La musique c'est beau / *belle.
*the.SG.F music.SG.F CE.is beautiful.SG.M/*SG.F*
- b. La musique est *beau / belle.
*the.SG.F music.SG.F is beautiful.*SG.M/SG.F*

To address this point, we follow an insight from Danon's (2012) treatment of sentences involving the pronoun *ze* in Hebrew, which manifest the blocking of adjectival agreement similar to what we find in the French (34)a.⁶ Danon argues that the agreement properties should be linked to the particular interpretive properties of the subject.

As pointed out in the literature on Hebrew copular sentences, subjects in *ze*-sentences with adjectival predicates do not refer to individuals and are restricted to an

⁶ Hebrew lacks present tense form for 'be', so that copular sentences appear either without any copular verb or with a pronoun. The distribution and syntactic behavior of Hebrew *ze* are strikingly similar to those of French *ce* but further research is necessary to determine how deep this similarity is.

eventuality-related interpretation, (viz. Danon 2012; Greenberg 2008; Heller 1999).⁷ In the absence of a copula – see note 6 – as in (35)a, the subject refers to 'young students'; in the presence of *ze* – notice that the adjectival predicate is singular in (35)b – the subject refers to some salient eventuality involving young students:

- (35) a. studentim ce'irim me'anyenim.
students.PL young. PL interesting.PL
 'Young students are interesting.'
- b. studentim ce'irim ze me'anyen.
students.PL young. PL ZE interesting.SG
 'Teaching/talking to/etc... young students is interesting.'

To explain the absence of agreement in *ze*-sentences, Danon suggests two possibilities. One is to assume that the subject is generated directly above *ze* and above the predicate. With *ze* being closer to the predicate than the actual subject, the structural configuration for agreement with the subject would not be met. The other possibility is to assume that the subject is phi-feature opaque.⁸

⁷ Swedish and Brazilian Portuguese also exhibit copular constructions in which the absence of agreement leads to a generic/eventuality-related interpretation. However, these languages differ from French and Hebrew in lacking a pronominal form equivalent to *ce*.

- (i) a. Pannkakor är goda. (Swedish: Wechsler (2013))
pancakes be.PRES good.PL
 'Pancakes are good.'
- b. Pannkakor är gott.
pancakes be.PRES good.NT.SG
 roughly, 'Eating pancakes is good.'
- (ii) Crianças é divertido (Brazilian Portuguese: Foltran & Rodrigues (2013))
children is fun.sg
 '(Having, raising, ...) children is fun'

⁸ Greenberg (2008) argues that the (singular masculine) adjective in (35)b agrees with a null noun 'thing', which is masculine and singular. In her view, *DP ze/ce AP* copular sentences are actually of the form *DP ze/ce [DP DP AP]*. We do not adopt this approach because it predicts that the adjective can be both predicative and attributive (intersective and non-intersective). However, only predicative adjectives are possible in such sentences, illustrated in French (i) and Hebrew (ii), suggesting that the predicate *is* the AP.

- (i) a. *L'enfance c'est pauvre.
the childhood CE.is poor
 'Childhood is poor.' (in the non-predicative sense of *poor*, i.e. *unlucky*).
- b. *La vieillesse c'est futur.
the old-age CE.is future
 'Old age is a thing of the future.'
- (ii) a. *studentim ce'irim ze qodem.
students young ZE prior
 'Doing something with young students is the prior thing.'

There are several issues with the first analysis for French (also rejected by Danon for Hebrew). Most importantly, the sentences in (31) are true predications (for instance in (31)a, *green* is predicated of *vegetables*; i.e., *green(vegetables)*) and hence, by our original assumption, the predication relation is established in an asymmetrical PredP small clause from the beginning of the derivation. *Les légumes* 'vegetables' starts out as the subject in Spec/PredP and cannot have been generated above *ce*. In other words, when the subject *les légumes* appears higher than *ce*, it must have been moved there in the course of the derivation.

Instead, Danon argues that the subjects in *ze*-sentences are phi-feature opaque. Danon points out that such subjects do not license anaphor binding. His Hebrew examples in (36) are replicated in French (37)-(38).

(36) a. *namer mesukan le-acmo.*
tiger.m.sg dangerous.m.sg to.himself
 'A tiger is dangerous to itself.'

b. **namer ze mesukan le-acmo.*
tiger.m.sg ze dangerous.m.sg to.self

(37) a. *Les tigres sont dangereux pour eux-mêmes.*
the tigers are dangerous for themselves

b. **Les tigres c'est dangereux pour eux-même(s).*
the tigers CE.is dangerous for themselves

(38) a. *Les légumes sont verts par eux-mêmes.*
the vegetables are green.pl by themselves

b. **Les légumes c'est vert par eux-même(s).*
the vegetables CE.is green.sg by themselves/by itself

Danon surmises that if subjects of *ze*-sentences and, we add, adjectival *ce*-sentences, have phi-features (for instance, agreement between N and a modifying adjective is possible inside the subject DP), these are invisible to agreement operations targeting the whole DP, e.g., agreement with an adjectival predicate or with the verb.

From our perspective, subjects of adjectival *ce*-sentences cannot satisfy Subj1's agreement features. The resultant state of affairs is similar to the one that characterizes the canonical and inverse sentences discussed in sections 2 and 3, in the sense that here as well movement to Spec/Subj1 is impossible. In the cases of adjectival predication, this is not an effect of focalization, as we have seen, but is due to the inaccessibility of the phi-features necessary for agreement with Subj1. The prediction is that *ce* will appear

b. **yladim ze axaron.*
 children ZE last
 '(Having) children is the last thing.'

obligatorily whenever an agree operation cannot be successful; *ce* is introduced to satisfy the phi features of Subj1.

(39) *ce* SUBJ1 [TP est [PredP [DP les légumes] [PRED [AP vert]]]]

Following this step, The DP subject *les légumes* is further moved to Spec/Subj2.

(40) *les légumes* SUBJ2 [*ce* SUBJ1 [TP est [PredP [~~DP les légumes~~] [PRED [AP vert]]]]]

In this configuration, movement to Spec/Subj2 is not blocked by *ce* in Spec/Subj1. But why this should be so? One possibility that comes to mind is that Relativized Minimality intervention for argumental DPs is sensitive to phi features, rather than to the category D (or N). Under this view - which actually goes back to Rizzi (2004) - *ce* is an intervener for a phi-bearing element and fails to block movement of the (phi-opaque) subject of these adjectival copular sentences.

In sum, in adjectival *ce*-sentences, the appearance of *ce* is motivated by agreement (rather than focus), but it leads, as the previous cases, to the movement of the subject DP to the high subject position Subj2.

Subjects of *ce* sentences with nominal predicates cannot be interpreted existentially. A comparable limitation holds of subjects in Spec/Subj2 in adjectival *ce*-sentences. Consider the contrast in (41) between *ce+être* and *être* alone sentences.

- (41) a. Les légumes c'est vert. *generic only*
the.PL vegetable.PL CE.is green.SG
 'Vegetables are green'.
- b. Les légumes sont verts. *specific; generic*
the.PL vegetable.PL are green.PL
 '(The) vegetables are green'.

This is reminiscent of the results of many studies that have argued that subject DPs with generic reference (e.g., bare plural subjects of i-level predicates), or those which refer to kinds, can be subsumed under the term *categorical* (as opposed to *thetic*, viz. Kuroda (1972), Ladusaw (2000)). Cartographic studies of subject positions, e.g., Cardinaletti (2004) and Bianchi & Chesi (2014), have explicitly argued that the position of such subjects is the high subject position - our Spec/Subj2.

In this context, a note is in order regarding the source of the generic interpretation in e.g., (31). Genericity may have various sources, be it at the sentential level (i.e. a Gen operator), at the predicate level (under certain views, this is the case for i-level predicates; Kratzer (1995)) or at the nominal level. In the cases at hand, genericity does not come from either the sentence nor the predicate, but from inside the nominal subject itself, namely the subject in Spec/Subj2.

There are two types of genericity of the subject in *ce*-sentences. One type involves abstractions over individuals and another type involves abstraction over situations. The

first case is illustrated by (42); the second by (43). Some sentences are ambiguous between the two, (44).

(42) a. Les légumes c'est vert.
the.PL vegetable.PL CE.is green.SG
'Vegetables are green'.

b. La musique classique c'est beau.
the.SG.F music.SG.F classical.SG CE.is beautiful.SG.M
'Classical music is beautiful'.

(43) Les enfants c'est chouette.
the.PL children CE.is fun
'Doing something with children (having them, playing with them, raising them, and so on) is cool/fun.'

(44) Les enfants c'est bruyant.
the.PL children CE.is fun
a. 'Children are noisy'.
b. 'Doing something with children (playing with them, being with them, and so on) is noisy.'

In the first case, the generic interpretation comes from an abstraction over individuals (e.g., *les légumes* 'vegetables'), or a mass (e.g. *la musique classique* 'classical music') and over worlds (any vegetables, past vegetables, existing vegetables and future vegetables). In the second case, the generic interpretation involves abstraction over situations in which the individual denoted by DP1 is necessarily a theme, as demonstrated by the impossibility of the (b) interpretation of (45) (adapting an example from Wechsler (2015)).

(45) Deux amants c'est immoral.
two lovers CE.is immoral
a. 'To have two lovers is immoral'.
b. *'Two lovers who love each other are immoral'.

If this is the case, apparent restrictions on proper names in adjectival *ce*-sentences, as in (46), can be straightforwardly explained. Proper names do not allow abstraction over individuals and possible worlds; and since *beau* 'handsome' and *intelligent* 'intelligent' are not predicates of situations, abstraction over situations is not possible either, rendering the sentences in (46) ungrammatical.

(46) *Jean c'est beau / intelligent.
Jean CE.is beautiful / intelligent

Bare nominal predicates behave in this respect like the adjectives *beau / intelligent* (see also Roy (2013)) leading to the ungrammaticality of (47) for the exact same reasons.

(47) *Jean c'est enseignant.
Jean CE.is teacher

If, however, the predicative adjective allows an eventuality reading (i.e. could be predicated of eventualities / situations), the restriction on proper names disappears:

(48) Jean *c'est* charmant/ennuyeux.

Jean CE.is charming / boring

'Doing something with Jean (inviting him, talking to him, and so on) is charming / boring'.

Restrictions on natural kinds (definite singulars in French), which may at first sight seem surprising, can be subsumed under the same case as proper names:

(49) **La panthère nébuleuse c'est éteint.*

the clouded leopard CE.is extinct

Coming back to the relationship between the fact that the subjects moved to Spec/Subj2 are phi-feature opaque, and their particular interpretive properties, we can speculate that the semantic process involved in shifting definite descriptions into abstractions over individuals, worlds and situations is formally coded by a more complex linguistic item inside which phi-features, even though morphologically present, cannot be retrieved anymore. In other terms, it is as if abstracting over a name like *Paul* and shifting its reference to salient situations involving Paul, or abstracting over a definite description like *la musique classique* 'classical music' so that it comes to refer to any sort of classical music, before, now and in the future, renders their nominal agreement features opaque, inaccessible to clausal syntax. We leave the specific implementation of such interface mechanisms open for future discussion.

5. Conclusion

We argued for a structural account of the presence and the role of *ce* in French copular sentences based on the following key ingredients. All copular sentences are derived from an asymmetrical PredP small clause. The functional domain of the clause involves two distinct subject positions, namely Subj1 and Subj2, with their own interpretive properties.

In our view, *ce* is inserted in French whenever an agreement relationship fails to be established between Subj1 and an element from the PredP bearing active, interpretable phi-features. The sources of the agreement failure may be diverse, and we have considered here two cases. In one case, syntactic constraints (Relativized Minimality, criterial freezing) together with focalization (be it optional, as in the case of canonical sentences, or obligatory, as in the case of inverse ones), lead to the inability to move the subject to Subj1, resulting in failure of agreement checking. In the other case, agreement failure results, not from focalization, but from the absence of accessible phi-features on the subject, possibly as the result of a grammatical shift at the interface.

What these two cases have in common, however, is that they force the movement of the subject into the higher of the two subject positions, yielding its particular interpretive properties (i.e., presuppositional / generic but not existential).

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