Focus, contrast, and the syntax-phonology interface: The case of French cleft-sentences

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue for a prosodic approach (Samek-Lodovici 2005) to the preference for cleft-sentences over canonical sentences in two focusing contexts in French: answers to subject constituent questions and contrastive [+/- corrective] contexts. Our proposal is that the ranking $S_f \gg \text{EPP,HI} \gg \text{HU} \gg \ast \text{STRUCTURE}$ is responsible for the emergence of cleft-sentences in answers to subject constituent questions and the emergence of canonical sentences in answers to non-subject constituent questions. As for contrastive [+/- corrective] cleft-sentences, we propose to treat them as cases of nested foci, in the same line as the analysis offered by Féry & Samek-Lodovici (2006) for so-called Superman sentences.

Keywords: French, cleft-sentences, subject focusing, nested foci, typology.

1. Introduction

Languages vary in the extent to which they use cleft-sentences and also in the contexts in which they use them. The fact that French speakers tend to use cleft-sentences as answers to subject wh-questions has been noticed by Belletti & Leonini (2004) in their experimental investigation of French learners of Italian as well as by Lambrecht (2001), who claims that focused constituents are excluded from the preverbal subject position in French. Lambrecht discards the possibility that this ban on preverbal foci in French follows from a phonological requirement, and suggests that instead, “the relevant constraint operates at the level of the mapping of syntax and information structure, prohibiting the occurrence of focus elements in preverbal subject position”. The same view is advocated by Zerbian (2005, 2006, 2007) in her OT account of Northern Sotho, a Bantu language spoken in South Africa which exhibits a subject/non-subject asymmetry strikingly close to the one observed in French. The aim of this work is to consider the alternative according to which the ban on focused preverbal subjects in French follows from phonology, and more particularly from the fact that, although the preverbal position can
host a pitch accent, it cannot receive the main stress of the clause. We argue that, in French, the preference for cleft-sentences over canonical sentences in subject focusing follows from the high ranking of the constraint which requires that a focus be most prominent in its focus domain (SRESSFOCUS), the tie on EPP, which requires that clauses have overt subjects, and H₁, which requires that the head of an intonation phrase be aligned with its right boundary and the ranking of *STRUCTURE below these constraints. What about non-subject cleft-sentences? Although they are excluded from information focus contexts, they are well formed and often preferred to canonical sentences in certain contrastive contexts. We propose an account of these cleft-sentences in the same line as the one proposed by Féry & Samek-Lodovici (2006) (henceforth F&SL) for so-called Superman sentences, that is, a type of nested foci which constitute an exception to rightmost stress. Finally, we propose that our analysis extends to corrective cleft-sentences, which in our view constitute an instance of free second occurrence focus. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the French in 2.1 and the NS data as well as Zerbian's syntax-information structure interface account in 2.2. Section 3 is dedicated to our prosodic account of French cleft-sentences: section 3.1 concentrates on non-contrastive cleft-sentences and section 3.2 on two types of contrastive clefts. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Subject/non-subject asymmetry in French and Northern Sotho's information focusing

2.1. French subject focusing

In their L2 acquisition experimental study, Belletti & Leonini (2004) (henceforth B&L) observe that non-advanced French L2 speakers of Italian produce cleft-sentences with a very high percentage in contexts where the Italian verb-subject order is expected that is, in focusing subject contexts. This is illustrated in the following data (B&L 2004: 111).

(1) A: Chi ha portato questi fiori? ‘Who brought these flowers?’  
   B: ha portato i fiori una donna.¹ (L1 speaker)  
       has brought the flowers a woman  
   C: E’ una donna che ha portato i fiori. (L2 speaker)  
       is a woman who has brought the flowers  
‘It is a woman who has brought the flowers.’

As observed by B&L, the French learners of Italian investigated in their study tend to transfer the strategy of their L1 to their L2 and consequently, to produce a cleft-sentence
in a context where Italian speakers would produce a verb-subject inversion. Lambrecht (2001:491) also acknowledges the fact that French is similar to Spanish and differs from languages such as English and German in that the focus is banned from the preverbal position. Indeed, for many French speakers, the most common way to answer a question such as the one in example (2A) is by means of cleft-sentence (2B). However, in object and adjunct focusing, canonical sentences are preferred to their cleft-sentence counterpart. This is illustrated in the subsequent examples.

(2)  
A: Qui est-ce qui mange un biscuit?  
who is-it that eats a cookie  
‘Who is eating a cookie?’
B: C’est Thomas qui mange un biscuit.  
it-is Thomas that eats a cookie  
‘It is Thomas that is eating a cookie.’

(3)  
A: Qu’est-ce qu’il mange?  
what is-it that he eats  
‘What is he eating?’
B: # C’est un biscuit qu’il mange.  
is-it a cookie that he eats  
‘It is a cookie that he is eating.’
B’: Il mange un biscuit.  
he eats a cookie  
‘He is eating a cookie.’

(4)  
A: A qui est-ce qu’il parle?  
Whom is he talking to?’
B: # C’est à Marie qu’il parle.  
‘It is Mary that he is talking to.’
B’: Il parle à Marie.  
‘He is talking to Mary.’

(5)  
A: Où est-ce qu’il va?  
‘Where is he going?’
B: # C’est à la maison qu’il va.  
‘It is at home that he is going.’
B’: Il va à la maison.  
‘He is going home.’

The label ‘cleft-sentence’ refers to the sentences from (2B) to (5B), bi-clausal structures divided into a matrix clause (TP) and a relative-like clause (CP). In a context such as the one provided in (2A), the relative clause in (2B) can simply be omitted, yielding what is usually referred to as a ‘reduced’ cleft-sentence. There is a vast literature on cleft-sentences, as they have long been an object of interest. From a syntactic perspective, we assume the analysis proposed for French cleft-sentences by Clech-Darbon, Rebuschi & Rialland (1999) (henceforth CR&R). The syntactic structure they propose appears in (6) below.
Their approach challenges Lambrecht’s (2001:466 and references therein) constructional view of cleft-sentences, in arguing that they are the simple “amalgamation of independently occurring types of identificational sentences and relative clauses”, namely that there is nothing in their semantic and syntactic properties that “cannot, or not entirely, be accounted for in terms of other properties of the grammar of a language or universal grammar and which therefore require independent explanation”. In their view, the matrix clause is a typical identificational TP, whose specifier is occupied by the pronoun c’. Their analysis is “maximally simple” in that there is no movement other than that of an abstract relative operator within the relative-like clause. The functional category heading the relative-like CP is qui when the clefted constituent, that is, the complement of the copula, is the logical subject of the verb within the CP and que in all the other cases. As acknowledged by CR&R, French admits no explicit relative pronoun as head of this CP. This is illustrated in the following examples, in which the presence of an explicit relative marker forces to interpret the sentences as presentational sentences involving a genuine restrictive relative clause and discard the cleft-sentence reading.

(7) C’est la maison dans laquelle j’ai dormi.
It is the house in the-which I have slept
‘This is the house in which I slept.’

(8) C’est la fille à qui j’ai confié Fido.
It is the girl to whom I have entrusted Fido
‘This is the girl to whom I entrusted Fido.’

In their analysis, they treat the functional category heading the CP in cleft-sentences as a complementizer (Comp) and assume that an abstract relative pronoun covertly moves from an argument/adjunct position to Spec,CP. Although we agree with their analysis, we depart from it in the following respect: we adopt the view advocated by Taraldsen (2002) that, in Standard French, the form qui which emerges in so-called cases of ‘subject-extraction’ is actually an amalgamation of the Comp que and an expletive subject pronoun – i. In certain dialects of French, a subject pronoun explicitly occurs in this position. This is illustrated in the following example from a song by Loïc Lantoine3:

(9) C’est nous qu’ on s’ra les P.D.G.
It is us that we will be the C.E.O
‘It’s us that will be CEOs.’

Another argument comes from the fact that the frequent omission of the last segment of the expletive pronoun il has lead some speakers to re-analyse the string qu’il (Comp + expletive) into qui. This is illustrated in the subsequent example4:
In other words, we take the view that the subject position within the relative-like clause of a ‘subject’ cleft-sentence is not empty but overtly filled by an expletive –i, which attaches to the Comp que and yields the form qui.

To sum up: In the context provided by subject constituent questions of the type qui/qu’est-ce qui, the most common way to answer in French is by means of a cleft-sentence, whereas in non-subject questions of the same wh-word + est-ce que type, cleft-sentences are inappropriate and canonical sentences preferred. We now turn to another language which exhibits the same behaviour with respect to answering constituent questions.

2.2. Northern Sotho

The subject/non-subject asymmetry observed in French has been observed in other languages and more particularly in certain Bantu languages. Northern Sotho (henceforth NS), a SVO language spoken in South Africa, is among them. In her study of this language, Zerbian (2006, 2007) describes at length the contexts in which cleft-sentences are either the only or among the least marked alternative(s) in certain discourse contexts. For reasons of lack of space and time, we will only concentrate on informational focus in the present work, and we leave the other areas mentioned by this author for future research.

There are several ways to question subjects in NS, however the one described by Zerbian as the most common is by means of a cleft-sentence. Alternative structures are described as pragmatically more marked.

(11) A: Ké mang a-nyaka-ng ngaka?
   COP who CL1-look.for-REL CL9-doctor
   ‘Who is looking for the doctor?’

   B: Ké mo-kglabje a-nyaka -ng ngaka.
   COP CL1-old.man CL1-look.for-REL CL9-doctor
   ‘It is the old man who is looking for the doctor.’

The syntactic structure assumed in Zerbian (2006) for a sentence such as the one in (11A) or (11B) follows:

(12) [č Ke mang, [Ip t, a-nyaka-ng ngaka]]

In NS, the cleft-sentence is characterized by the presence of the copula ké, which appears right before the subject. A relative affix, -ng, is attached to the final vowel of the verb and there is a change in the verbal morphology, as the subject marker a is used in-
stead of the class marker o. The syntactic analysis adopted by Zerbian for NS is different in several respects from the one assumed for French and illustrated in (6). The structure in (12) is a mono-clausal structure in which the clefted constituent, here the wh-word mang - considered as inherently focused - is assumed to move from its argument position within IP to a higher (specifier?) position in the CP domain.

Contrary to subjects, objects and adjuncts are both questioned and focused in-situ, as illustrated in the following question-answer pairs.

(13) A: Mokgalabje ó-nyaka mang?
   CL1-old.man 3rd.CL1-look.for who
   ‘Who is the old man looking for?’
B: Mokgalabje ó-nyaka ngaka.
   CL1-old.man 3rd.CL1-look.for  CL9-doctor
   ‘The old man is looking for the doctor.’

(14) A: Mokgalabje ó-jwala mo-hlare neng?
   CL1-old.man 3rd.CL1-plant CL3-tree when
   ‘When is the old man planting a tree?’
B: Mokgalabje ó-jwala mo-hlare lehono.
   CL1-old.man 3rd.CL1-plant CL3-tree today
   ‘The old man is planting a tree today.’

NS’s asymmetry in subject/non-subject focusing has traditionally been accounted for by the claim that in this language the subject position is a topic position and, as a consequence non-topical elements cannot surface there. Zerbian’s (2007) (and references therein) optimal theoretic account is in the same line as traditional analyses. The hierarchical ranking of constraints proposed by this author is the following:

(15) Northern Sotho: SUBJECT = TOPIC >> SUBJECT >> STAY >> FOC-SPEC >> *STR

As mentioned above, NS’s canonical order is Subject-Verb-Object. As in English or French, the subject is assumed to move from a position inside VP to the specifier of a I-related head. This movement is taken to indicate that in this language the constraint Subject outranks the constraint Stay. Both constraints appear below.

(16) SUBJECT: Sentences have overt subjects in SpecIP.

(17) STAY: Don’t move constituents.

The constraint SUBJECT (Grimshaw 1997), also referred to as EPP (‘Clauses have an overt subject’), corresponds to Chomsky’s (1982) Extended Projection Principle. There are (at least) two trends with respect to the evaluation of this constraint. On the one hand, Zerbian (2007, and references therein) considers that SUBJECT is violated whenever the logical subject is not located in the subject position. For instance, the following example displaying an impersonal construction violates this constraint.
(18)  a. Go-fihla ba-eti.  (from Zerbian 2006)
     CL17-arrive CL2-guest
     ‘There are guests arriving’

On the other hand, in Samek-Lodovici (2005) this constraint is violated whenever the “highest A-specifier -- or the specifier of I-related heads such as T°, Agr°, Neg°-- is not overtly filled”. Our own proposal (section 3) is in the same line as the latter approach, in considering that impersonal constructions displaying an expletive in the preverbal subject position satisfy SUBJECT/EPP. As for the constraint STAY in (17), it has the effect of favouring absence of movement over movement and is violated by every trace (or copy) present in the derivation.

In order to account for the fact that a cleft-sentence is preferred to its canonical counterpart in subject focusing contexts, Zerbian proposes that the following interface constraint ranks above all the other constraints in NS:

(19) SUBJECT = TOPIC: The grammatical subject of the sentence must not be F-marked.

The interface constraint SUBJECT = TOPIC is violated whenever the subject position hosts a focused constituent. This constraint is reminiscent of Zerbian’s (2006) constraint *SUBJ/F-MARKED, and revolves around the notion of harmony. The view advocated in Zerbian (2006) is slightly different from the one defended in Zerbian (2007). *SUBJ/F-MARKED was aimed at capturing the generalization that subjects do not have to be topics in order to appear in the preverbal subject position, but they have to be non-focused. The two constraints are equivalent, and they are derived through the harmonic alignment of two scales: the grammatical function scale (Subject > Non-subject) and the focus scale (Non-Focus-marked > Focus-marked). The idea is that the subject position attracts non-F-marked constituents over F-marked ones: the presence of a narrowly focused subject in the preverbal position is therefore “unharmonic” and the constraint *SUBJ/F-MARKED is violated whenever this configuration occurs. The fact that in NS focused subjects never appear in the preverbal position leads Zerbian to conclude that SUBJECT = TOPIC outranks SUBJECT and STAY.

All else being equal, the constraint *STRUCTURE (*STR) favours less complex structures over more complex ones in terms of functional layers. Every additional functional layer incurs one violation of this constraint. The fact that cleft-sentences emerge in NS is taken to indicate that the constraint in (20) is not high-ranked in this language.

(20) *STRUCTURE: Avoid structure.

Finally, the interplay of STAY with FOC-SPEC in (21) ensures that, in NS, object and adjuncts are focused in-situ.
(21) \text{FOC-SPEC}: Focused constituents must be in a specifier position.

Zerbian's \text{FOC-SPEC} is also an interface constraint. It maps an information structure category, namely focus, with a position in the syntactic structure. \text{FOC-SPEC} is parallel to the constraint \text{Op-SPEC} (Grimshaw 1997), which requires that operators such as wh-words be in a specifier position. This is the case in languages such as German and English, in which obligatory wh-movement in wh-questions can be accounted for by the high-ranking of such a constraint. As wh-structure and focus-structure exhibit the same behaviour in NS, Zerbian proposes a reformulation of \text{Op-SPEC} into \text{FOC-SPEC}. This constraint is violated whenever a focused constituent is not located in a specifier position, as is the case in object and adjunct focusing in NS. Zerbian derives the in-situ focusing of these constituents through the ranking of \text{STAV} above \text{FOC-SPEC}.

To sum up, French and NS seem to share the same subject/non-subject asymmetry in the use of cleft-sentences in answers to constituent questions. As was illustrated above, in NS this asymmetry has been tied to the relation between syntax and information structure. This analysis is reminiscent of the one suggested by Lambrecht (2001:492) for French: “(...) the relevant constraint operates at the level of the mapping of syntax and information structure, prohibiting the occurrence of focus elements in preverbal subject position”. In the following subsection, we propose an alternative approach to the subject/non-subject asymmetry observed in informational focusing contexts, where the observed pattern is a consequence of the interaction of prosodic and syntactic constraints and relates the French data to what has been observed in English and Italian subject focusing.

3. A prosodic approach to French informational and contrastive focus

3.1. Towards an analysis of the French subject/non-subject asymmetry

3.1.1. Italian and English subject focusing

We adopt an alternative path and propose an account of French in the spirit of the analyses which have recently been proposed for Italian and English subject focusing within OT (a.o. Szendrői 2001; Samek-Lodovici 2005). Contrary to the approaches previously cited, in which discourse influences syntax, in the present account the asymmetry is derived through the interplay of prosodic and syntactic constraints. Our account is based on the claim that, contrary to what has long been assumed, pitch accent is not the main correlate of focus but main stress is (a.o. Féry & Samek-Lodovici 2004, Samek-Lodovi-
ci 2005, Büring 2008). Although pitch accents are not banned from the preverbal subject position in French, we argue that leftmost main stress has a marked status in French and is avoided whenever another structure is available in the language that satisfies the same syntactic, semantic and discursive requirements and at the same time enables satisfying Hi.

Before going through the details of our own analysis, we will briefly outline Samek-Lodovici’s (henceforth SL) analysis of English and Italian focusing. Italian and English are both SVO head-initial languages and have in common that they are rightward oriented with respect to main stress: in the neutral case (all-focus sentences) the main prosodic prominence is aligned with the right-edge of the clause. This is illustrated in the subsequent examples, where capitals indicate the position of main stress.

(22)  
A:  What happened?  
B:  A woman brought the FLOWERS.  
B’:  Una donna ha portato i FIORI.  
‘A woman has brought the flowers.’

Within the OT approach proposed by SL, the link between prosodic prominence and focus has been implemented under the form of the STRESS-FOCUS constraint.

(23)  
STRESS-FOCUS (SF): A focused phrase has the highest prosodic prominence in its focus domain.  
STRESS-FOCUS ensures that no candidate can emerge that assigns more prominence to a non-focused item than to a focused one.

In English and Italian, phonological constraints push the main stress towards the right-edge of the clause.

(24)  
HP: Align the right boundary of every P-phrase with its head(s).  
(25)  
HI: Align the right boundary of every I-phrase with its head(s).

HP and HI, adapted from McCarthy & Prince (1993) and Truckenbrodt (1995, 1999) (see SL 2005 and references therein), require that prosodic heads (phrasal stress) be aligned with the right boundary of the corresponding phonological and intonation phrases (Selkirk's 1984 prosodic hierarchy: prosodic word < phonological phrase (φ) < intonation phrase (I) < utterance phrase (U)), where phonological phrases correspond to lexical XPs (NPs, VP and APs) with the functional items on their non recursive side, and intonation phrases to syntactic clauses.

What’s crucial is that in the languages considered here, the subject position does not match the position where main stress is neutrally assigned. The fact that focused items must bear the highest prosodic prominence in their domain makes subject focusing in languages such as Italian and English an area of the grammar where the respective de-
mands of prosody and syntax clash: on the one hand, prosody requires from the main stress of the clause to be aligned with its right-edge, and on the other hand, syntax requires that the preverbal subject position be filled. English and Italian both show their own strategy in order to solve this conflict. English favours syntax over prosody in keeping the canonical SVO order and shifting the main stress to the subject. This is illustrated in the following example.

(26) A: Who bought a cake?
   B: JOHN bought a cake.
   B’: JOHN did.

Italian adopts the reverse strategy in favouring prosody over syntax: main stress keeps its rightward position while the subject occupies a position located at the right-edge of the clause, as illustrated in example (1) and repeated below for convenience.

(27) A: Chi ha portato questi fiori?
   ‘Who brought these flowers?’
   B: Le ha portato una DONNA, i fiori.
   them has brought a woman the flowers

In other words, when the respective requirements of syntax and prosody clash, syntax gets the upper hand in English that is, the canonical SVO order is preserved, whereas in Italian prosody does and the canonical SVO order is simply discarded.

In his extensive study of different focusing paradigms, SL proposes that the following hierarchical rankings of constraints are responsible for the above facts:

(28) English: SF >> EPP >> STAY >> HP >> HI
(29) Italian: SF >> HI >> HP >> EPP >> STAY

In both languages, SF is the highest-ranked constraint. In English, the hierarchical ranking of the syntactic constraints EPP and STAY above the prosodic constraints HP and HI allows for the emergence of a candidate such as (26B), in which the main prominence is not aligned with the right-edge of the clause. The reversed ranking of these constraints, in Italian, is responsible for the emergence of the candidate (27B), in which the subject position is empty.

3.1.2. French subject focusing

Let now finally turn to our French subject/non-subject asymmetry. French is similar to Italian and English in that it is a SVO language whose main stress is neutrally assigned to the right-edge of the clause. As illustrated below, in all-focus sentences, main stress falls on the rightmost item.
A: What happened?
B: Une femme a apporté des FLEURS.
   a woman has brought some flowers
   ‘A woman brought flowers.’

Our proposal is that the asymmetry described in section 2.1 follows from the subsequent hierarchical ranking of constraints (we leave the ranking of HP open for further research):

(31) French: SF >> EPP,HI >> *STR

As in English, Italian and NS, we take the French SVO canonical order to indicate that EPP is ranked above STAY in this language. However, as was mentioned in section 2.1 and contrary to Zerbian’s syntactic assumptions about cleft-sentences in NS, the analysis adopted for French cleft-sentences does not involve a movement of the focused constituent. As a consequence, the constraint STAY is not crucial in order to account for the distribution of cleft-sentences in information focusing contexts. We propose that the preference for cleft-sentences over canonical sentences in subject focusing follows from the interplay of the four constraints SF, EPP, HI and *STR.

The constraint SF outranks all the other constraints, as no candidate can emerge in French which assigns more prosodic prominence to a non-focused constituent than to a focused one. The crucial constraints here are the syntactic EPP constraint and the prosodic HI constraint. We have seen that the ranking of EPP above HI is responsible for the leftmost stress displayed in English subject focusing, whereas the ranking of HI above EPP is responsible for the empty subject position and the final subject configuration witnessed in Italian. These two languages favour one constraint over the other and are in this respect different from French, which resorts to a configuration, namely a cleft-sentence, that satisfies both EPP and HI, to the prejudice of *STR.

The proposed ranking for French subject focusing is illustrated in the tableau 1 in (32). Candidate a, the winning candidate, is a cleft-sentence. From a syntactic perspective, this candidate contains more layers than candidates b to d and therefore fares worse on the constraint *STR.
Candidate $a$, as candidates $c$ and $d$, however satisfies $S_r$, as the most prominent item within a cleft-sentence is notoriously the clefted constituent.

From a prosodic perspective, we have represented the cleft-sentence as split into two intonation phrases, one encompassing the identificational TP and the other the relative-like clause. In other words, in the type of cleft-sentences investigated in this work, each clause is wrapped within a separate intonation phrase. In the prosodic structure offered in tableau 3, the focused item, which is here the head of the intonation phrase, is aligned with the right-edge of this prosodic constituent, thus satisfying $H_i$. The phonological structure proposed here is easily derivable from the syntactic structure proposed by CR&R by applying standard syntax-phonology mapping rules (Nespor & Vogel 1986). This structure is supported by their acoustic data and consistent with their observations. These authors give the following ‘classical’ pattern of the type of cleft-sentences considered in this section that is, declarative subject-narrow-focus cleft-sentences:

(33)  [C’est Jean-Pierre] [qui est sorti]
       | |              | |  
       H L%          L L%

‘It’s J.-P. who’s gone out.’

The tones are only noted on the secondary ($Jean$ and $est$) and the main ($Pierre$ and $sorti$) stressed positions. The relative clause is characterized by a flat intonation. They observe that a terminal low boundary tone (L%) is present once at the end of the focused phrase and again at the end of the relative-like clause. They further note that this “duplication of what is otherwise identified as typical ‘terminal intonation’ may also involve other features typical of the end of utterances, such as final lengthening”. We take this as evidence for the presence of two separate intonation phrases.

The fact that French is not a null subject language also seems to point towards the
relatively high ranking of EPP. As mentioned above, EPP is only violated when the subject position is not overtly filled. This is not the case in the matrix clause of cleft-sentences in French, as the pronoun c’, be it expletive or not, occupies this position. EPP is also satisfied in the relative clause, as the Comp qui simultaneously heads CP and fills the subject position. In tableau 1, only candidate d, the counterpart of the Italian verb-subject inversion, violates EPP, which constitutes a fatal violation and leads to the elimination of this candidate. The cleft-sentence alone does not allow determining whether HI dominates EPP in French or whether it is EPP that dominates HI, as this construction enables satisfying both constraints. For the time being, we propose that neither constraint dominates the other in French. As for Italian and English, we propose that the ranking of *STR above EPP and Hi prevents the cleft-sentence candidate from emerging in (non-contrastive) subject focusing contexts in these languages.

The proposed ranking of constraints also enables to account for the non-emergence of cleft-sentences in object and adjunct focusing. Objects and adjuncts are distinct from subjects in that their canonical position is closer to the right-edge of the clause. As shown in the following tableau, *STR prevents the cleft-sentence from emerging when the canonical sentence satisfies SF and HI.

(34) Tableau 2: object focusing in French

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context: What is Mona eating?</th>
<th>SF</th>
<th>EPP</th>
<th>HI</th>
<th>*STR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. [p Mona [i mange un biscuit]]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[i {φ, Mona} {φ mange un BISCUIT}]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. [p [c’] est un biscuit] [c que [p Mona mange]]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[i {φ, C’est un BISCUIT}] [i {φ que Mona mange}]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* !</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What about the ranking of STAY? In his study, SL uses object focusing in bi-transitive constructions in order to determine whether STAY dominates Hi or whether Hi dominates STAY. In French bi-transitive constructions, the canonical order is S-V-DO-IO. However, French also resorts to heavy NP-shift when necessary, therefore the ordering of the object with respect to the indirect object can be flexible in French. In our investigation of the preferred strategy in order to put narrow focus on the object in a context such as the one provided below in (35A), we could obtain no categorical judgment from the French speakers investigated. Based on the following type of “marginally acceptable” (35B), in which the direct object is stranded in clause final position, SL concludes that French is similar to Italian in ranking HI above STAY.
French shares with NS the possibility of leaving wh-phrases in-situ in wh-questions. Therefore, (36) below seems to constitute a well-formed alternative to (35A).

(36) Tu vends quoi à Mona?
    You sell what to Mona
    ‘What are you selling to Mona?’

(36) however does not allow to conclude that French is similar to English in that the main stress can simply shift from the indirect object to the in-situ direct object, as (36) is preferably interpreted as involving a multiple focus: one on the wh-phrase and the other on the indirect object. It is worth noting that the interrogative counterpart to (35B) is undoubtedly ungrammatical.

(37) * Tu vends à Mona quoi?
    you sell to Mona what
    ‘What are you selling to Mona?’

For the time being, and as it is not crucial in the account of the subject/non-subject asymmetry in the distribution of cleft-sentences, we leave the issue of STAY’s ranking open for further research.

3.1.3. Summary and discussion

In sum, we have proposed that cleft-sentences satisfy SF, EPP and HI in that they simultaneously assign the highest prominence to the focused item, they permit to align this main stress with the right-edge of an intonation phrase and their two subject positions are overtly filled. They fare worse than canonical sentences on *STR, but this violation is only fatal in non-subject focusing due to the low ranking of this constraint in the language. Cleft-sentences have long been associated with the notion of extraction of the focused item and as a consequence with movement. We have departed from this view in claiming that the constraint STAY is not crucial in an account of the competition between canonical sentences and clefts. How to prevent cleft-sentences from emerging in English and Italian subject focusing? The ranking of *STR is crucial here: we propose that this constraint is ranked above HI and EPP in these languages.
Our account captures Jespersen’s (1937) view that cleft-sentences can be considered one of the ways “by which the disadvantages of having a comparatively rigid grammatical word-order (SVO) can be obviated” and Lambrecht’s (2001:488) principle 1, stating that “the occurrence of cleft constructions in a language correlates with the degree of positional freedom of prosodic accents and syntactic constituents in that language”. In addition to that, we hope to have shown that the prosodic prominence of the clefted constituent directly follows from the grammar and is perfectly consistent with the phonology of the language. From a theoretical perspective, our account crucially reduces the number of constraints used in order to account for the phenomenon under investigation, as we have postulated no extra (interface) constraint. Does our account extend to NS? One of Zerbian’s (2005, 2006) main claims is that there is no prosodic expression of focus in Northern Sotho and that this language more generally lacks grammatical focus marking. From a prosodic perspective, Northern Sotho is distinct from French, English and Italian, as it is a tone language. However, as shown by Zerbian (2006, Chapter 3), it also has accentual properties of the type observed in the above cited European languages and several phonetic cues speak in favour of rightmost prominence in this language. Zerbian (2005) admits that “phono-syntactic processes like deletion, morphosyntactic operations like pronominalization, and syntactic movement like dislocation and inversion conspire in order to place the focused constituent in clause-final position”. In our view, these facts added to the striking resemblance with French speak in favour of a reconsideration of the null-hypothesis, that is, that Northern Sotho has some means of grammatical (prosodic?) focus marking.

3.2. French contrastive cleft-sentences

3.2.1. Non-corrective contrastive cleft-sentences

In section 3.1, we have provided an account to the preference for cleft-sentences over canonical sentences in the type of information focusing context set by a wh-question. We have concluded that this preference follows from the ranking in (31). The proposed ranking predicts that adjunct and object cleft-sentences do not surface as optimal candidates in information focusing contexts, but we now have to account for the fact that they do surface, along with subject cleft-sentences, in contrastive contexts. This is the case in the following examples:
A: ‘Why do you suspect me?’
B: C'est vos EMPREINTES qu' on a trouvées sur le coffre.
   ‘It is your fingerprints that they found on the safe.’

A: Why are you so interested in Paris? (Adapted from Lambrecht (2001)
B: C'est à PARIS que j'ai rencontré ma FEMME
   It's in Paris that I met my wife.

A: Things have changed at the Miller family (Adapted from Umbach 2004)
B: (Ce soir) c'est Ronald qui est allé faire les courses
   This evening it-is Ronald that is gone do the grocery

The above cleft-sentences are so-called « informative-presupposition it-clefts » in Prince's (1978) terminology. They are characterized by (i) the exhaustive identification (contrastiveness) of the clefted constituent, (ii) by the non-given status of the (presupposed) relative-clause and (iii) the obligatory presence of a prosodic accent on the relative clause (Lambrecht 2001: 483). In Umbach's (2004:164) terminology, the above examples are cases « which come close to a correction, although the proposition to be corrected is not expressed explicitly. What is noticeable is that the informative status of the relative clause does not prevent main stress from being assigned to the clefted constituent. This is reminiscent of so-called Superman-sentences in example (43) (Neeleman & Szendrői 2004, F&SL 2006). Superman sentences are cases of nested focus/foci. They are among the sentences displaying the following configuration, where “SF requires both foci to bear the highest prosodic prominence and can be satisfied by assigning local prominence to the innermost focus”.

This configuration is illustrated in the following example:

Father: What happened?
Mother: You know how I think our children should read decent books. Well, when I came home, rather than doing his homework, Johnny was reading SUPERMAN to some kid.

The above example contains three foci: the entire sentence (f1) is a new information focus, as it is part of the answer to the father's question, reading superman to some kid (f2) is contrastively focused against doing his homework and finally, Superman (f3) is contrastively focused against decent books, « and appears to take the entire VP as its focus domain. As mentioned in (23), Sr requires that a focused constituent be most prominent in its focus domain. F&SL adopt Truckenbrodt's (1995) definition of focus domain, which makes Sr sensitive to the extension of the focus domain: « the focus domain always contains the focused phrase and identifies the background information relevant to
the semantic denotation of focus; it is thus defined in semantic terms and does not necessarily coincide with a single prosodic constituent ».

In the cleft-sentences in section 2, the focus was constituted of one constituent (for instance *Thomas* in example (2B)) and the focus domain of the entire sentence. However, as the relative clause was given, and typically deaccented, we could have easily accounted for the non-rightmost stress at the level of U by resorting to the constraint DESTRESS\text{\textit{GIVEN}} (F&SL and references therein).

(44) **DESTRESS\text{\textit{GIVEN}}**: A given phrase is prosodically non-prominent.

The Superman sentence in (43) and the examples in (38) to (40) have in common that the non-rightmost stress cannot be explained through the given status of the items separating the main stress from the right-edge of the sentence. F&SL propose that the ranking of SF above HI correctly predicts the non-rightmost stress in example (43). Placing main stress on Superman is the only way to simultaneously satisfy SF with respect to f1, f2 and f3. The rightmost position of main stress that would follow from the ranking of HI above SF would satisfy SF with respect to f1 and f2, but would fail SF with respect to f3. The ranking of SF above HI is not sufficient in order to account for the clefting strategy adopted in French in such cases of contrastive foci. The requirement that main stress be aligned with the right-edge of an intonation phrase appears stronger in French. HI is satisfied in the examples (38) to (40), as the right boundary of each I-phrase is aligned with its head. We propose that these data can be accounted for by the ranking of SF above HEAD-U (Samek-Lodovici 2005).

(45) **HEAD-U (HU)**: Align the right-boundary of every utterance phrase with its head. Example (43) only involves a single intonation phrase and as a consequence the head of this phrase is also the head of the utterance phrase (U). This is not the case in the above cleft-sentences, which involve two separate intonation phrases and require that the utterance level be considered separately.

We propose that the pattern observed in contrastive cleft-sentences follows from the following constraint ranking: $\text{SF}_{\text{Contrast}} \gg \text{SF}_{\text{New}} \gg \text{HI} (\text{EPP}) \gg \text{HU} \gg ^*\text{STR}$

For more accuracy, we distinguish between $\text{SF}_{\text{Contrast}}$ ($\text{SF}_C$) and $\text{SF}_{\text{New}}$ ($\text{SF}_N$) (F&SL). Indeed, in examples (38) to (40), the clefted constituent is a contrastive focus, but the overall sentence is an information focus.
Tableau 3: French nested foci (contrastive focus + information focus)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(46)</th>
<th>Pourquoi est-ce que vous me soupçonnez?</th>
<th>SF</th>
<th>SFN</th>
<th>HI</th>
<th>HU</th>
<th>*STR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>x ) U</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>x ) I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>x ) P</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>[C'est vos EMPREINTESf2 qu'on a trouvées sur le COFFRE]f1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>x ) U</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>x ) I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>x ) P</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| b.   | [C'est vos EMPREINTESf2 qu'on a trouvées sur le COFFRE]f1 | | | | | *
| c.   | x ) U                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| c.   | x ) I                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| c.   | x ) P                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| c.   | [On a trouvé vos empreintesf2 sur le COFFRE]f1 | | | | | *
| d.   | x ) U                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| d.   | x ) I                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| d.   | x ) P                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| d.   | [On a trouvé vos EMPREINTESf2 sur le COFFRE]f1 | | | | | *
| e.   | x ) U                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| e.   | x ) I                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| e.   | x ) P                                 |    |     |    |    |      |
| e.   | [On a trouvé vos empreintesf2 sur le coffre]f1 | | | | | *

Candidate $a$ is the optimal candidate. It satisfies both $SF_C$ and $SF_N$ in placing main stress on $f_2$. It also satisfies $HI$ in aligning both heads with each intonation phrase's right boundary. Placing main stress on $f_2$ however violates $HU$, as the head of this phrase is not aligned with its right boundary. Finally, candidate $a$ violates $*STR$, as it involves more structural layers than its canonical counterpart. Candidate $b$, which never surfaces as an optimal candidate, shows that $SF_C$ outranks both $SF_N$ and $HU$ in French. The violation of $SF_C$ is fatal, even though both $SF_N$ and $HU$ are satisfied. Candidate $c$ is the optimal candidate under an all-focus reading. It is a mono-clausal structure that involves a single intonation phrase. Under the reading investigated here (narrow focus + broad focus), the alignment of the main stress with the right-boundary of $U$ and $I$, although it satisfies $HI$ and $HU$, violates $SF_C$. Candidate $d$ never surfaces as an optimal candidate. This candidate is reminiscent of Neeleman and Szendrői’s (2004) observation that in an example such as (43), it is not possible to stress both Superman and some kid in order to simultaneously “provide stress to $f_3$ and rightmost stress to $f_2$", that is, to simultaneously satisfy $SF$ on $f_3$ and $HI$. In F&SL’s account, this would indeed amount to a violation of both $SF$ and $HI$: on the one hand, Superman would no longer be the most prominent item in its focus domain (the entire VP) and on the other hand, the head on Superman would still be misaligned with the intonation phrase boundary. Similarly, “assigning multiple heads to the intonation phrase encompassing the entire clause” as in candidate $d$ violates $SF$ on $f_2$ because vos empreintes is no longer the most prominent item in its domain (the entire clause) and violates $HI$ (as well as $HU$), because the right boundary of the intonation phrase (as well as the utterance phrase) is misaligned relative to the head.
on vos empreintes. Finally, candidate e is an equivalent to the English example in (43), only it involves two foci instead of three. In French, this candidate is the optimal candidate under a discourse-given reading of sur le coffre. However, under the investigated reading, this candidate fatally violates H₁ and H₂.

In sum, the cleft-sentences from (38) to (40) exhibit a contrastively focused item in clefted position and a discourse-novel relative clause which (i) cannot be omitted and (ii) is accented although is does not receive main stress. Another way to look at these so-called cases of “informative-presupposition” cleft-sentences is, as we have proposed, that they constitute cases of nested foci reminiscent of so-called Superman sentences, as the pattern [C’est [XP], qui YP,] is similar to the configuration in (41). We have maintained that in French, the conflict observed in English between S_f and H₁ is transposed into a S_f and H₂ conflict.

3.2.2. Corrective contrastive cleft-sentences

Finally, we would like to turn to corrective contrastive cleft-sentences. In Umbach's (2004) terminology, the following examples are cases of “exclusion by substitution”: the clefted constituent aims at correcting a previously mistaken belief.

(47) A: ‘Mona is eating a plum.’
    B: Non, c’est Daniel qui mange une prune.
    ‘No, it’s Daniel who is eating a plum.’

(48) A: ‘He is eating a plum.’
    B: Non, c’est un biscuit qu’il mange.
    ‘No, it’s a cookie that he is eating.’

(49) A: ‘He is talking to Mary.’
    B: Non, c’est à Mona qu’il parle.
    ‘No, it’s to Mona that he is talking.’

(50) A: ‘He is going home.’
    B: Non, c’est à l’école qu’il va.
    ‘No, it’s to school that he is going.’

What is noticeable is that although the relative clause is discourse-given, speakers have the strong intuition that it generally needs to be produced in corrective contrastive contexts. In our view, this is not surprising considering that corrective contexts are distinct from wh-questions contexts in that no gap is waiting for an item/value to fill it. The expression of the relative clause is necessary in order to understand which value is corrected / replaced, in other words which gap is filled. There seems to be a requirement on the spelling-out of the predicate that holds for the (correct) focused item. The overall sentence itself unexpectedly replaces an all-focus sentence expressing a mistaken belief. Although this needs more investigation, we would like to propose that in corrective con-
contrastive contexts the overall cleft-sentence is a case of free second occurrence focus (Büring 2008) embedding a contrastive focus in the clefted position. If this is correct, the analysis proposed above for informative-presupposition cleft-sentences would extend to this type of cleft-sentences as well.

4. Conclusion

We have investigated two areas involving the use of cleft-sentences: answers to subject constituent questions and contrastive focus contexts. The data from both French and Northern Sotho (Zerbian 2006, 2007) seem to indicate that the distribution of cleft-sentences does not only follow from the exhaustiveness of the focused constituent. We have argued for a prosodic approach (à la Samek-Lodovici 2005) of the subject/non subject asymmetry in the distribution of cleft-sentences in French information focusing. As for the emergence of subject and non-subject cleft-sentences as optimal candidates in two types of contrastive contexts, we have proposed to account for it in a way similar to the one offered in Féry & Samek-Lodovici (2006) for so-called Superman sentences, that is, as instances of nested foci.

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1 Or rather: “Le ha portato una donna, i fiori”, with a clitic right-dislocated object.
2 Some French speakers seem to accept in-situ subject focusing (J.M. Marandin, p.c.). Do they have a different French grammar than the one accounted for here, or is it that what seems to be in-situ focusing is in fact right dislocation of the elements following the subject? We leave this open for future research.
3 “Quand les cigares” in Tout est calme, 2006, U10
5 I would like to thank Prof. Manfred Krifka for drawing my attention to this fact.
6 It is worth noting that questioning a subject by means of a cleft-sentence is not as common in French as in NS. Cleft subject wh-questions are grammatical and productive, however they are highly stigmatized by prescriptive grammars and as a consequence children are often corrected when they produce such sentences.
7 It is unclear whether French speakers do produce this type of wh-in situ questions. In order for “à Mona” not to be interpreted as focused, the clitic “lui” is required: “Tu lui vends quoi à Mona?”. In this case “Mona” is interpreted to be given.