

Focus structure as a parameter of language typology: The example of (spoken) French

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The analysis of large corpora of spoken French discourse reveals a striking preponderance of a sentence construction which I call the 'Preferred-Clause Construction' (PCC) and whose basic structure is [pro-V (XP)] (where 'pro' is a bound ("clitic") pronoun, including relative qui, and where XP is a lexical or independent pronominal argument or adjunct phrase). The PCC replaces the canonical [NP V (XP)] sentence type, in which the preverbal subject position is filled by a lexical NP. I argue that the statistical preference for the PCC (95 to 97 % of all clauses in the corpora are of this type) is not the simple result of general processing constraints on spoken language production but the language-specific manifestation of universal constraints on the mapping of information structure and grammatical structure. These constraints limit the amount of new referential information expressible in a single clause: presentational structures are crosslinguistically limited to a subtype of intransitive clause (Her father died has an eventive (orthetic) reading, Her father died of cancer does not). They also limit the possible discourse statuses of the referents of topic expressions. Topical referents must be hearer-old and preferably discourse-old (cf. the oddness of individual-level predications like A boy is tall).

While these mapping constraints are universal, their grammatical manifestation is subject to typological variation (e.g. Van Valin 1999). Although spoken English has been shown to strongly prefer pronominal over lexical subjects (Prince 1981, Francis, Gregory & Michaelis 1999), hence to avoid focal subjects, it nevertheless permits subject-focus mapping in sentence-focus and argument-focus constructions (My CAR broke down, WHO took the money? - JOHN did). In spoken French, in contrast, such sentences are unacceptable if not ungrammatical. Spoken French shows a near one-to-one mapping relation between focus structure and phrase structure: topic expressions occur in pronominal form and preverbal position (i.e. they must have discourse-active referents), while focus expressions only occur postverbally (or else in the pre-clausal COMP slot, which welcomes both topical and focal elements). The finite verb is unmarked for the topic-focus opposition, as per the principle of focus projection. Spoken French is thus close to languages like Malagasy (Keenan & Ochs 1979), Samoan (Ochs 1988), or Sacapultec (Dubois 1981), in which lexical subjects may not cooccur with lexical objects and in which focal subjects are unacceptable.

In order not to violate its strict mapping constraints, French speakers use a number of special 'Preferred-Clause-Targeted' (PCT) constructions, which rearrange constituents in such a way that focus expressions occur post-verbally while topic expressions occur as preverbal bound pronouns. The most important of these PCT constructions are DISLOCATIONS (allowing topical constituents with non-discourse-active referents to occur outside their clausal or nominal predicating domains) and SECONDARY-PREDICATIONS (allowing focal referents to first occur in post-verbal position and then to be taken up in pro or null form in secondary predication domains). The purpose of my talk is to describe the striking variety of French PCT constructions, many of which do not exist in English.