Information structure in Québec French, A clever … clefter way to oppose and to select.

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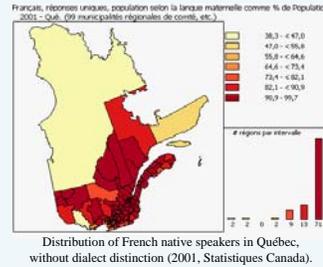(in collaboration with project D2 „Typology of Information Structure")

1. Object language

Among the different dialects of French spoken in Canada, Québec French is the one with the largest number of speakers (around 6 million speakers). It is spoken throughout the province (except the northern part where native languages are more common and the Haute Côte-Nord and Gaspésie where Acadian French is spoken).

Distribution of French native speakers in Québec, without dialect distinction (2001, Statistiques Canada).

Along with the other Canadian French dialects, Québec French is surrounded by over 300 million speakers of English. Unlike the other Canadian French dialects however, the survival of the language is not at risk, even though the rate of increase of speakers is below the normal population reproduction rate for conservation. In the other dialects, the assimilation rate to English, especially for the Western dialects, is somewhat worrying.

Data: The data collection for this survey was taken from 8 native speakers (4 females, 4 males) aged between 15 and 19. The data was collected in early 2006. This group was chosen for the homogeneity of its dialect, in order to avoid potential dialect variations with adult subjects.

2. Information Structure

In Québec French, as in most (if not all) dialects of French, intonation plays a small part in IS. In simple clauses the canonical word order in French is SVO.

Although intonation can be used to turn an affirmative sentence into an interrogative one, highlighting of a focus is mainly achieved by special syntactic constructions, such as clefts. The focussed constituent then also shows prosodic effects (increased pitch range).

An interesting construction in Québec French is the interrogative using the interrogative particle –tu. This is not to be confused with the 2.SG pronoun. In fact, the –tu particle is used at every person and number and is always suffixed to the inflected part of the verb (the verb itself or the auxiliary). Ex: **Y** (il) **veut-tu manger?** (he, wants, PTC, to eat) *Does he want to eat?*

Of interest in our collected data in Québec French, is the quite extended use of clefts. Though this has been described and analyzed before (see the short bibliography below), use of clefts specifically to express selection and correction has not been discussed for French. As noted earlier, the cleft also licenses stronger prosodic effects than in the canonical form. This is the topic of the present poster.

3. Empirical observations

In the data collected during the field session:
- among questions expecting a **correction** in the question
  - 5 clefts out of 15 questions
- among questions where the speaker **selects** between two possible answers
  - 4 clefts out of 15 questions
- among **WH-questions**
  - 4 clefts out of 15 questions

These three contexts elicited a clefted sentence more often than all other contexts.

It is interesting to note that throughout the whole data, the subject of the cleft was always *agent* (rather than patient), even in questions targeting the patient. In cases where the subject of the cleft was the patient, the question was usually in a passive form.

Below are two examples of correction and two of selection.

The examples below give: the question (translated), the answer (Words) a simplified gloss (Gloss) and a phonetic transcription (Phono, in SAMPA).

CORRECTION																		
Devant le puit . Est -ce qu' une femme pousse l' homme ? (In front of the well, is a woman pushing the man?)										Dans la maison d'pierre . Est -ce qu' une femme tue l' homme ? (In the stone house, is a woman killing the man?)								
Words	Non	,	c'	est	un	autre	homme	qui	pousse	l'	homme	Non	,	c'	est	un	homme	qui	tue	l'	homme
Gloss	no		it	is	an	other	man	who	pushes	the	man	no		it	is	a	man	who	kills	the	man
Phono	nO~		se	t9~	**no**	trOm	k(i)	pUs	IOm			nO~		se	t9~	**nOm**	k(i)	tsy	IOm		

SELECTION																
Qui a un perroquet , Samuel ou William? (Who has a parrot, Samuel or William?)								Devant le puit, est-ce qu'un homme ou une femme pousse la voiture? (In front of the well, is a man or a woman pushing the car?)							
Words	C'	est	Samuel	qui	a	le	perroquet	C'	est	un	homme	qui	pousse	la	voiture
Gloss	it	is	Samuel	who	has	the	parrot	it	is	a	man	who	pushes	the	car
Phono	se	sa	my	**yEl**	k(i)a	l9	pE RO kE	st9~		**nOm**	ki	pUs	la	vwa	tsyR

4. Summary/Future Work

Because of its prosodic effect, clefting seems to be preferred to express selection and correction. The data is not quite conclusive since only 4 of the 8 subjects were asked questions focusing on selection/correction. In the recorded dialogs between the subjects, the other 4 subjects did however also use clefting for this purpose. A finer analysis of the data is required here.

It would be interesting to collect more data targeting mainly correction/selection answers, using a larger set of speakers, to see if indeed cleft is a favoured strategy to express the said target and to identify the prosodic nature of these forms.

Selected references on the syntax and phonology of clefts in French:
Da Vidse, Kristin (2000). A constructional approach to clefts, *Linguistics* **38–6**, Walter de Gruyter: 1101–1131
Doherty, Monica (2001). Discourse functions and language-specific conditions for the use of cleft(-like) sentences: a prelude. *Linguistics* **39–3**, Walter de Gruyter: 457-462
Lambrecht, Knud (2001). A framework for the analysis of cleft constructions. *Linguistics* **39–3**, Walter de Gruyter: 463–516
Lambrecht, Knud (1994). *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rebuschi, Georges & Laurice Tuller (eds.) (1998). *The Grammar of Focus*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

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