

French predicative verbless constructions: A clausal analysis

This paper focuses on a verbless construction of French that exhibits clausal properties (1-2).

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|-----|----|--|-----|----|---|
| (1) | a. | Encore en retard, [ton frère].
<i>Late again, [your brother].</i> | (2) | a. | Encore en retard.
<i>Late again.</i> |
| | b. | Quel dommage, [qu'il ne vienne pas]!
<i>What a pity, [that he doesn't come]!</i> | | b. | Quel dommage!
<i>What a pity!</i> |
| | c. | A quelle heure, [le train pour Paris]?
<i>At what time, [the train to Paris]?</i> | | c. | A quelle heure?
<i>At what time?</i> |

One hallmark of the construction is the bracketed phrase that can occur in its right periphery as demonstrated in (1). Those phrases, which we label α -phrases for convenience, have been analyzed as the subjects of the non-verbal predicate of the construction by Lefeuvre (1999). According to this analysis, the examples in (1) and (2) are thus considered to be instances of two distinct constructions.

The first section of the paper is concerned with the syntactic, semantic and discourse properties of the verbless construction presented in (1) and (2). A unified analysis of both sets of examples is proposed. These are argued to be instances of a verbless predicative clausal construction. Unlike other verbless predicative constructions studied in the literature [Bender, 2001] [Henri and Abeillé, 2007], the distributional properties of the construction differ from those of verbal clauses.

The second section is concerned with the analysis of α -phrases. We show that they are best analyzed as right-dislocates and discuss the consequences of this analysis for that of the verbless construction as a whole.

The last section provides a formalization of the analysis of the predicative verbless construction in a constructional version of the HPSG framework.

1 Analysis of the verbless construction

1.1 A headed predicative construction

The construction can either be an AP (3a) or a NP (3b) or a PP (3c).

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| (3) | a. | [Très sympathique] _{AP} , ton frère. | <i>Very nice, your brother.</i> |
| | b. | [Une vraie crème] _{NP} , ton frère. | <i>A very kind man, your brother.</i> |
| | c. | [Encore en retard] _{PP} , ton frère. | <i>Late again, your brother.</i> |

It cannot be an adverbial phrase (4).

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|-----|----|--|
| (4) | a. | *[Très rapidement] _{AdvP} que l'affaire a été résolue
<i>Very quickly, that the matter has been solved</i> |
|-----|----|--|

The head of the phrase must be a non-verbal predicative word, predicative words being defined as words that subcategorize for a subject¹. The predicativity of the head is signaled by the fact that only predicative adjectives are compatible with the construction (5) as well as by the compatibility of the construction with floating quantifier such as “tous” (all) or “chacun” (each) (6) quantifying over the external argument of the head.

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| (5) | a. | *Assise, la place que tu me proposes | <i>Seated, the ticket that you're offering me</i> |
| | b. | *Présidentielle aujourd'hui, la réunion | <i>Presidential today, the meeting</i> |
| (6) | a. | Tous en retard, tes amis. | <i>All late, your friends.</i> |
| | b. | Chacun chez eux, tes amis. | <i>Each at their own places, your friends.</i> |

¹ [Sag, 2007] defines the subject of predicative words as both their external argument (feature XARG) and the first element on their argument structure list (feature ARG-ST).

The predicative verbless construction only appears in root contexts (7b). This behavior parallels that of declarative fragments such as short answers (7a) and could be explained by the properties of the complementizer “que” which is only compatible with tensed verbal clauses.

- (7) a. A- Qu'est-ce qu'il veut? *A- What does he want?*
 B- *Je pense que le livre *B- I think that the book*
 b. *Je pense qu'encore en retard, son frère *I think that late again, his brother*

However, this constraint does not apply to interrogative fragments such as short questions (8a) but still applies to the predicative verbless construction (8b).

- (8) a. A- Le train va arriver. *A- The train will arrive.*
 B- Je me demande à quelle heure. *B- I wonder at what time.*
 b. *Je me demande à quelle heure, le prochain train *I wonder at what time, the next train*

The construction cannot be coordinated with verbal clauses (9).

- (9) a. *Très joli tableau et je pense qu'il se vendra bien
Very nice picture and I think it will sell easily
 b. C'est un très joli tableau et je pense qu'il se vendra bien.
It's a very nice picture and I think it will sell easily.

It should also be noted that the reconstruction of a verbal form is not always possible making an ellipsis-based account inappropriate (10).

- (10) a. Quelle belle photo, celle que tu as prise.
What a nice photograph the one you took.,
 b. *Quelle belle photo c'est, celle que tu as prise
What a beautiful photograph it is, the one you took

1.2 A message-denoting construction

The semantic content of a phrase can be determined, independently from its pragmatic uses, using the selectional properties of verbs [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000]. However, because the predicative verbless construction cannot function as the complement of any verb, we are left with the selectional properties of other items such as evaluative adverbs and illocutionary tags.

Selectional properties of some French illocutionary tags [Beysade and Marandin, 2006] are summarized in the table below.

Tags	Felicitous with	Resulting type of call-on-addressee
“sans indiscretion” (just for information)	declarative clauses interrogative clauses	question
“n'est-ce pas” (isn't it)	declarative clauses exclamative clauses	question
“oui ou non” (yes or no)	declarative clauses polar interrogative clauses	question
“point barre” (period)	declarative clauses imperative clauses	proposition outcome

Applying these tests to the verbless construction, we observe that some of them behave like declarative clauses (11), some like interrogative clauses (12) and some like exclamative clauses (13).

- (11) a. Sans indiscrétion, encore en retard, ton frère?
Just for information, late again, your brother?
 b. Encore en retard, ton frère, n'est-ce pas?
Late again, your brother, isn't it?
- (12) a. Sans indiscrétion, à quelle heure, le train pour Paris?
Just for information, at what time, the next train?
 b. #A quelle heure, le train pour Paris, n'est-ce pas?
At what time, the next train, isn't it?

- (13) a. #Sans indiscretion, quel dommage, qu'il ne vienne pas?
Just for information, what a pity, that he doesn't come?
 b. Quel dommage, qu'il ne vienne pas, n'est-ce pas?
What a pity, that he doesn't come, isn't it?

Despite the fact that verbless sentences can have an imperative call-on-addressee, there are no imperative predicative clauses. Possible candidates behave in fact like declarative clauses (14).

- (14) a. Sans indiscretion, tous sur le toit?
Just for information, everybody on the roof.
 b. Tous sur le toit, n'est-ce pas?
Everybody on the roof, isn't it?

1.3 Discourse properties

Verbless constructions of French or English that denote *messages* usually fall into the descriptive class of fragments. Fragments are defined as phrases whose semantic contribution is dependent from the semantic content of another phrase. For example, *short answers* as illustrated in (15) must be associated with the content of a preceding utterance to get an interpretation [Ginzburg, 2001].

- (15) A- Who came? B- Bob.

This is not the case of the construction under study here, whose contribution is determined both by the predicative head of the construction and the construction itself independently from the context. This is confirmed by the fact that the construction can appear at the beginning of a dialog (16).

- (16) A- Très joli, ce tableau. *A- Very nice, this picture.*
 B- Oui. Je suis d'accord avec toi. *B- Yes. I agree with you.*

2 Analysis of α -phrases

2.1 α -phrases are right-dislocates

The properties of α -phrases are distinct from those of both French pre- and post-verbal subjects [Bonami, Godard and Marandin, 1999] and pattern systematically with those of right-dislocates. The relevant properties include, among others, the compatibility with quantified and restricted noun phrases, the type of agreement of the phrase with the head of the clause and the compatibility with a discourse configuration we call elaborative enumeration.

2.1.1 Quantified and restrictive noun phrases

Unlike subjects, both right-dislocates (17a) and α phrases (17b) cannot be quantified noun phrases.

- (17) a. *Il est en encore retard, tout étudiant qui a acheté un vélo
He is late again, every student that has bought a bike
 b. *Encore en retard, tout étudiant qui a acheté un vélo
Late again, every student that has bought a bike

Right dislocates (18a) and α -phrases (18b) cannot contain a restrictive operator like “only”.

- (18) a. *Elle est encore en retard, seulement Marie *She is late again, only Mary*
 b. *Encore en retard, seulement Marie *Late again, only Mary*

2.1.2 Agreement type

Following Wechsler and Zlatić (2000), we distinguish two different types of agreement features: CONCORD and INDEX. CONCORD involves morphosyntactic features lexically attached to nouns and pronouns while INDEX is linked to the actual denotation of noun phrases. While French subject-verb agreement is of the CONCORD type, the examples in (19) show that the agreement between non verbal predicates and right dislocates or α -phrases is not (at least exclusively) of the CONCORD type.

- (19) a. Très beau, toutes ces décorations sur le sapin.
Really beautiful [masc, sg], all these ornaments [fem, pl] on the Christmas tree.
 b. C'est très beau, toutes ces décorations sur le sapin.
It's really beautiful [masc, sg], all these ornaments [fem, pl] on the Christmas tree.

2.1.3 Sensitivity to discourse relations

Right dislocates (20) and α -phrases (21) are not compatible with some discourse relations (here explanation).

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|------|---|------|---|
| (20) | <p>Tout est en ordre.
#Elle est magnifique, la table.
#Il est délicieux, le gâteau.
Je crois que tout est prêt.
<i>Everything is fine.</i>
<i>It's beautiful, the table.</i>
<i>It's delicious, the cake.</i>
<i>I think everything is ready.</i></p> | (21) | <p>Tout est en ordre.
#Magnifique, la table.
#Délicieux, le gâteau.
Je crois que tout est prêt.
<i>Everything is fine.</i>
<i>Beautiful, the table.</i>
<i>Delicious, the cake.</i>
<i>I think everything is ready.</i></p> |
|------|---|------|---|

Contrastively, instances of the constructions with left dislocates are felicitous in such contexts (22).

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| (22) | <p>Tout est en ordre.
La table, magnifique.
Le gâteau, délicieux.
Je crois que tout est prêt.</p> | <p><i>Everything is fine.</i>
<i>The table, beautiful.</i>
<i>The cake, delicious.</i>
<i>I think everything is ready</i></p> |
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2.2 What do we learn from α -phrases being right-dislocates

Unlike left dislocates, right dislocates must always have an anaphoric antecedent within their host.

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| (23) | <p>a. Le placard, la porte est bloquée.
b. *La porte est bloquée, le placard.
c. A - Tu sais si quelqu'un a le code ?
B - La sœur de Paul, peut-être que oui.
B' - *Peut-être que oui, la sœur de Paul.</p> | <p><i>The cupboard, the door is stuck.</i>
<i>The door is stuck, the cupboard.</i>
<i>A - Any idea if someone knows the code ?</i>
<i>B - Paul's sister, maybe yes.</i>
<i>B' - Maybe yes, Paul's sister.</i></p> |
|------|---|---|

The anaphoric antecedent can be either a pronominal affix (24a), a pronoun (24b), a possessive determiner or adjective (24c-d), a nounless NP (24d-e) or the external argument of imperative verb forms (24f).

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| (24) | <p>a. Paul [lui en a] déjà parlé, à Marie, de cette histoire.
<i>Paul [to.her of.it has] already spoken, to Mary, of this story.</i>
b. On m'a déjà présenté à [lui], Paul.
<i>I was already introduced to him, Paul.</i>
c. [Son] livre est très intéressant, à Marie.
<i>Her book is very interesting, A Mary.</i>
d. [Le sien]] est très intéressant, de livre, à Marie.
<i>Hers is very interesting, DE book, A Mary.</i>
e. [Le rouge] est très intéressant, de livre.
<i>The red one is very interesting, DE book.</i>
f. [Venez], vous aussi².
<i>Come, you too.</i></p> |
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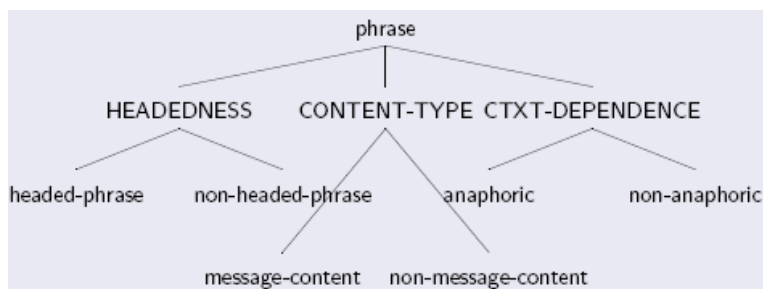
If α -phrase are right dislocates, then the external argument of verbless predicative constructions must have the same referential status as that of imperative verb forms. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that not every predicative construction allows for right dislocation of its external argument (25).

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| (25) | <p>a. *Etant souvent absente, Marie, il est impossible de lui parler avant vendredi.
<i>Being often absent, Mary, it is impossible to talk to her before Friday.</i>
b. *Bien qu'absente, Marie, il sera possible de lui parler vendredi.
<i>Although often absent, Mary, it will possible to talk to her on Friday.</i></p> |
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² Vocative phrase are incompatible with associative adverbs like « aussi » (too).

3 HPSG formalization

We propose a formalization of the analysis outlined above in a constructional version of the HPSG framework [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000]. We are primarily interested in the structure of the hierarchy of phrasal constructions. [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000] classify them along two dimensions: HEADEDNESS and CLAUSALITY. We replace the CLAUSALITY dimension with two dimensions: CONTENT-TYPE and CTXT-DEPENDENCE. Direct subtypes of HEADEDNESS set headed phrases apart from non-headed phrases. Direct subtypes of CONTENT-TYPE distinguish phrases denoting kinds of messages from phrases denoting content of other types. At last, CTXT-DEPENDENCE subtypes distinguish phrases whose semantic contribution is sensitive to the context (anaphoric) from phrases whose content is not context-dependent (non-anaphoric).



The type *clause* inherits from both *message-content* and *non-anaphoric* and must have a saturated valence.

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clause => message-content & non-anaphoric & [SUBJ  $\diamond$ ]
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The type *core-cl* is defined as a subtype of *clause* that cannot function as a modifier.

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core-cl => clause & [MOD none]
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The types *declarative-cl*, *interrogative-cl* and *exclamative-cl* are defined as subtypes of *core-clause* which are each associated with a specific subtype of *message*.

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declarative-cl => core-cl & [CONT proposition]
exclamative-cl => core-cl & [CONT exclamation]
interrogative-cl => core-cl & [CONT question]
  
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The type *predicative-cl* is defined as a subtype of *core-cl* which is restricted to root contexts, whose head is predicative, whose content is contributed both by its predicative head and constructionally and whose subject is a null pronoun.

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predicative-cl => core-cl & [
  ROOT +
  HEAD non-verbal [XARG pro-synsem 1]
  CONT [SOA [NUCL [MSG-ARG 2]]]
  HD-DTR [CONT 2]
]
  
```

Maximal subtypes of *predicative-cl* are given in the table below.

type	inherits from	example
declarative-predicative-cl	predicative-cl declarative-cl head-only-ph	Encore en retard. <i>Late again.</i>
exclamative-predicative-cl	predicative-cl exclamative-cl head-only-ph	Quel dommage! <i>What a pity!</i>
interrogative-predicative-cl	predicative-cl interrogative-cl head-only-ph	A quelle heure? <i>At what time?</i>

4 Selected references

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