

The interplay between syntax and information structure in French *il y a* clefts

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.

This talk will be about *il y a* 'there is' clefts, which very frequently occur in spoken French, where they are systematically preferred over SV sentences if the subject is (non-contrastively) focused (1). Besides these all-focus *il y a* clefts, Léard (1992) and Lambrecht (2001) also acknowledge the existence of 'non-exhaustive specificational *avoir* clefts', which seem to have a focus-background articulation (2), but which have never been analysed in detail.

(1) All-focus *il y a* cleft

- What's happening?

- *Y a le téléphone qui sonne.*

there has the phone that is.ringing

'The phone is ringing.' (Lambrecht 2000b:653)

(2) Focus – background *il y a* cleft

[Context: a mother looks around the dinner table and asks who wants some more meat. When she describes the scene later on, she utters:]

'*Y avait André qui voulait encore de la viande, y avait Bertrand, mais Claude il en voulait pas.*'

Lit. There was André who wanted more meat, there was Bertrand, but Claude, he didn't want any. (Lambrecht 2001:506-507)

Although *il y a* clefts are often mentioned as an example of presentational constructions and/or constructions which are typical of spoken French, they are under-researched (especially in contrast with *c'est* 'it is' clefts, see Doetjes et al. 2004 and Destruel 2013 for an overview): (i) descriptively: their distribution and information structure (IS) possibilities have not yet been described on the basis of corpus research (comparing spoken and written French); (ii) theoretically, no analysis has been given of their syntactic structure and the interplay between syntax and information structure in this construction (see Willems & Meullemans 2010, Choi-Jonin & Lagae 1997, Léard 1992, Giry-Schneider 1988 for some descriptive elements).

2. GOAL.

We will first give an overview of the distribution and IS possibilities of *il y a* clefts, on the basis of extensive corpus research in three types of corpora (section 3), we will then provide a syntactic analysis that incorporates the results of this corpus analysis (section 4): we will argue that a "high" analysis, in which the clefted element (CE) is in the clausal left periphery, does not apply to *il y a* clefts, and propose a new, "lower", analysis.

3. DISTRIBUTION AND IS: CORPUS RESEARCH.

We conducted corpus research in a corpus of journalistic written French (*Le Monde*, 25.7 M words), a corpus of informal written French (*Yahoo Q&A forum*; 6.1 M words) and a corpus of spoken French (*CFPP2000*; 500.000 words). The results of our corpus research gave a total of 561 *il y a* clefts in three corpora and shows: (i) that *il y a* clefts are indeed much more frequent in spoken than in written language, and more frequent in informal written than in formal written French; (ii) that 75% of *il y a* clefts occur in an all-focus context (1); (iii) that 23% are focus-background clefts (2), in which the clefted element does not have an exhaustive or a contrastive interpretation. Hence, this IS-interpretation of *il y a* clefts is not so marginal as suggested by previous linguistic literature. Lastly, (iv) 2% have a contrastive topic-comment

articulation (3), similarly to topic-shifting left-dislocation (3'). This IS-articulation of *il y a* clefts has not been mentioned before in linguistic literature.

(3) *il y'a un pilote qui arrive a poser un avion sur l'eau et évite la perte de 160 personnes, et d'un autre côté il y'a toi qui n'arrive même pas a faire une phrase compréhensible !!!* (Yahoo)

B: 'There's a pilot who manages to land a plane on the water and avoid the deaths of 160 people, and on the other hand **there's you who can't even write a comprehensible sentence!!!**'

(3') ... *et toi, tu n'arrives même pas à faire une phrase compréhensible !!!*

... and you, you can't even write a comprehensible sentence!!!

4. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS.

4.1. We will first argue against a 'high' analysis for *il y a* clefts (see Meinunger 1997/1998; Frascarelli & Ramaglia 2009/2013; Sleeman 2011; Kiss 1998 on *it is* clefts), in which both *il y a* and the clefted element (CE) are in Rizzi's (1997) left periphery: **(i)** the CE never has the typical contrastively focused interpretation associated with left-peripheral foci (see section 3); **(ii)** the CE can undergo *WH*-movement (4), and, hence, does not occupy the single FocP position in the left periphery (see Haegeman, Meinunger & Vercauteren (2009)'s argument against a high analysis for *it*-clefts). **(iii)** Because of its formal variation in tense and mood, as well as its non-referential character, *il y a* cannot be argued to be a pure focus marker (Klein 2012) or a left-peripheral topic. **(iv)** In contrast with other constructions involving a moved left-peripheral focus (Haegeman & Ürögdi 2010), *il y a* clefts occur in temporal clauses (5), and, hence, are no main clause phenomena. This shows that there is no intervention effect between the movement of the temporal operator and the movement of the CE to the left periphery, and, hence, that the CE did not move to the left periphery.

(4) *Qui y a-t-il t_{qui} qui joue du piano? = Il y a qui qui joue du piano?* (Fuchs 2009)

Lit. Who is there t who plays the piano? = There is who who plays the piano?

(5) *Quand il y a une personnalité importante qui meurt* (CFPP2000)

Lit. When there is an important person who dies

4.2. We will then argue in favor of a low analysis for *il y a* clefts in which **(i)** the expletive *il* is in SpecIP, where it satisfies EPP; **(ii)** the verb *a* (and the clitic *y*) is in I°, the regular position for inflected verbs in French, where it also precedes Cinque's (1999) high (6) and low (7) adverbs; **(iii)** the CE is in its base-generation position, where it is underdetermined for the IS-interpretation it gets (section 3), which explains why the CE can be part of a wide focus, a (non-contrastive) narrow focus or a (contrastive) topic, and **(iv)** the cleft relative clause is extraposed, as (8) shows (see Hedberg 2000 for an overview of extraposition of the cleft relative clause in *it* clefts, see also Rizzi 2010):

(6) *Il y a probablement un psychopathe qui sommeille en vous ...* (www)

(7) *Il y avait tout à coup un récit bien plus grand que nous qui traversait ...* (www)

(8) *y'a toi aujourd'hui qui découvre que tout ça est du blabla!* (www)

SELECTED REFERENCES. Haegeman, L., Meinunger, A., Vercauteren, A., 2013. The architecture of *it* clefts. *Journal of Linguistics*. Haegeman, L., Ürögdi, B., 2010a. Referential CPs and DPs: an operator movement account. *Theoretical Linguistics* 36, 111-152. Kiss, K. E., 1998. Identificational focus versus informational focus. *Language* 74, 245-273. Lambrecht, Knud. 2001. A framework for the analysis of cleft constructions. *Linguistics* 39(3). 463–516. Léard, Jean-Marcel. 1992. *Les gallicismes. Étude syntaxique et sémantique*. Paris-Louvain: Duculot.