

Predicative Verbless Sentences in French: A Clausal Analysis

The aim of the presentation is the analysis of verbless sentences such as those in (1):

- (1) a. Excellent café. Excellent coffee.
b. Quelle bonne idée. What a good idea.

They have been analyzed in the literature as 'elliptical sentences' or as 'verbless sentences'. More precisely, such labels correspond to three different analytical hypotheses:

- Hypothesis A: These sentences are phonologically elliptical verbal clauses.
- Hypothesis B: These sentences are non clausal non verbal phrases.
- Hypothesis C: These sentences are clausal non verbal phrases.

We show that hypotheses B and C must be preferred to A. Using a constructional approach of clauses types [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000], we then provide evidence in favor of hypothesis C over B.

Hypothesis A versus Hypotheses B and C

Under Hypothesis A, the sentences in (1) have the structure of non elliptical verbal sentences. This means that they must share the same properties (except for properties that may be directly linked to the ellipsis phenomenon.)

The sentences in (1) do not share their distributional properties with the verbal sentences we could reconstruct. They cannot be complements of a verb (2). This property could be attributed to ellipsis but B and C readily account for this difference.

- (2) a. *Je pense que bonne idée. I think that good idea.
b. Je pense que c'est une bonne idée. I think that it is a good idea.

Moreover, the ellipsis operation appears to be difficult to express for these sentences as determiners happen to be necessary in some cases (3a) and excluded in others (3b).

- (3) a. *(Une) vraie crème, ce type. A very kind man, this guy.
b. A- Je vais y aller. A- I decided to go there.
B- Bonne idée. B- Good idea.
B- #Une bonne idée. B- A good idea.

Hypothesis B versus Hypothesis C

In order to test hypotheses B and C, a definition of clause is needed. We propose a definition of *clause* consisting of four constraints. These constraints are designed to exclude all kinds of non clausal phrases including fragments such as short answers (4).

- (4) a. A- What are you eating?
B- An apple.

- Constraint A: A clause must be headed.
- Constraint B: The valence of a clause's head must be saturated.
- Constraint C: The semantic content of a clause must be a kind of *message*.
- Constraint D: The main semantic relation of the clause must be contributed locally (lexically or constructionally).

Constraints A, B and C are taken from [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000]. Constraint D aims at distinguishing between fragments and non fragments. The semantic contribution of a non fragment must be independent from the linguistic context. This is clearly not the case for short answers whose semantic content is sensitive to that of the question. [Laurens, 2007].

The sentences in (1) being predicative phrases, they are headed [Laurens, 2007]. Predicative heads are non verbal heads subcategorizing for a subject. Its presence in the structure despite its non canonical realization can be shown by the compatibility of these constructions with 'subject' right dislocation.

- (5) a. Bonne idée, d'avoir apporté à boire. Good idea, bringing some drinks.
 b. Quelle bonne idée, d'avoir apporté à boire. What a good idea, bringing some drinks.

In a constructional approach to clause types [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000], the construction can be said to be only compatible with predicative head with null subject realization.

The semantic content of (1a) is propositional while the one of (1b) is exclamative. This is shown by selectional properties of evaluative adverbs and illocutionary tags such as "n'est-ce pas" [Beysade and Marandin, 2006].

- (6) a. Malheureusement encore absent, Jean. Unluckily still absent, John.
 (7) a. *Heureusement quel délice, ton café. Luckily what a delight.

The main relation of these verbless constructions is interpreted independently from the linguistic context. This is shown by the fact that they can be uttered at the beginning of a dialog.

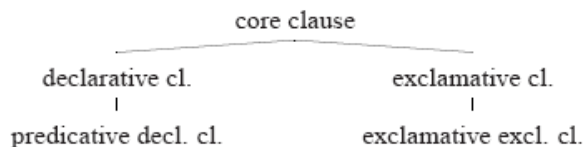
A Grammar Fragment

A grammar fragment has been developed in a constructional version of HPSG [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000] where phrase types are defined along two dimensions: the *clausality* and the *headedness* dimension.

We defined two types of predicative clause inheriting respectively from the types *declarative clause* and *exclamative clause* as defined in [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000].

Both verbless types force a non canonical realization of the subject of the predicative head.

A few change were made to the original [Ginzburg and Sag, 2000] grammar in order to allow for verbless core clause types.



References

[Beysade and Marandin, 2006] Beysade, C. and Marandin, J.-M. (2006). From complex to simple speech acts: a bidimensional analysis of illocutionary forces.
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