Fragments as instantiation of syntactic slots: Complexity of the interfaces between lexicon, grammar and discourse in spoken French

Marie Noelle ROUBAUD (Université de Provence)
Jose DEULOFEU (Université de Provence)

A particular feature of spontaneous speech syntax is the abundance of "fragments", that is non clausal text units, as from Biber and alii 1999. As from Cresti Moneglia 2005 a survey of a sampled corpus of French spoken styles shows that from a third or a quarter of total utterances are non clausal, depending on the gender of the subcorpora. Even when the main component of an utterance can be considered as clausal, the whole utterance appears as "fragmented" as its clausal nucleus is surrounded with fragments non integrated in the syntactic structure of the nucleus as in example (1) :

1.   mais bon honnêtement / enfin je sais pas / moi / bord de mer comme ça / Cannes / tout ça / c' est une ville de vieux quoi // ffam11
well honestly I don't know me seashore like this Cannes all this (stuff)
it is a city for old people right
As the slashes indicate prosodic breaks, a first type of fragment can be defined using the interface between prosody and syntax : a fragment is both syntactically and prosodically autonomous. But this correlation is far from valid in all instances of prosodically detached non clausal units. In the case of « stripping », exemplified in (2) :

2. ce soir là il est sorti // sans son chien
the major prosodic break could suggest that the fragment sans son chien is not syntactically integrated in the syntax of the first clause. This solution based on an hidden assumption of interface regularity requires a complex interpretive device along the lines of "indirect licensing"(Culicover Jackendoff 2005) for (2) to be fully analyzed, as sans son chien is semantically in a modifier-head relation with est sorti . An alternative proposal consists in assuming interface irregularity between prosody and syntax. Sans son chien could be analyzed syntactically as an adjunct of il est sorti , prosodically detached. The semantic role of modifier follows directly from this analysis, since the interpretation is based on syntactic structure. We can conclude that there are two types of non clausal units : those which are syntactically independent from the context and those which are syntactically dependent, although prosodically detached
This analysis can be independently motivated by cases involving another interface : lexicon and syntax.

We assume following Blanche -Benveniste and alii (1984) that the syntax lexicon interface is highly complex. There are many ways in witch a syntactic slot can be instantiated : null , pronominal , simple lexical , list of lexical items (Gerdés Kahane 2009). And finally what we will call discourse grafted instantiation (Deulofeu 2010). This approach is characterized by an extensive use of the last two types, which permits to integrate many fragments in the syntactic structure of the first part of the utterance. For instance the group ainsi que les partenaires in (3) will be considered as a second lexical instantiation of the syntactic slot subject of est venu, in spite of not being adjacent to the first instantiation les clients:

3. Les clients étaient venus ainsi que les partenaires
the clients came as well as the partners
One subcase that has been largely investigated in this framework (Roubaud 2000, Blanche-Benveniste,1985, 2010) displays a first instantiation by a pronoun or a "light" lexical unit

followed by a second bringing a semantic specification. The canonical form of this pattern is the pseudo cleft construction :
4. ce que je veux c'est aller à la plage
what I want is to go to the beach

But the specifying pattern is also encountered in constructs that are less grammaticalized and some of them (6) can be best considered as "discourse patterns" :
5. il y a quelque chose qui compte - il veut partir (o)
there is something which counts : he wants to leave

6. je voudrais juste faire une petite remarque en ce qui concerne la tarification – euh je pense qu'il faudrait faire une étude (o)
I just want to make a small remark as regards the prices : I think we should make an investigation

Even in the last example it is still possible to consider that the second clause is a lexical specification of a syntactic position of the first one. The difference is that contrary to the more grammatical patterns, the second clause do not meet the subcategorisation requirements of the main verb. But this situation is not exceptional : it can be considered as an extension of the "greffe" (graft) pattern as in Deulofeu (2010). Such patterns pose the question of the limits between syntax and discourse. And also between structural and "online syntax". Our paper proposes a corpus based typology of the constructs with "lexical specification" in comparison with the "projection" pattern proposed by Auer (2005, 2009).

References

Auer, Peter (2005): "Projection in Interaction and Projection in Grammar", in: Text 25, 1, 7-36.

Auer, Peter (2009): "Online-syntax: thoughts on the temporality of spoken language", Language Sciences 31, 1-13.

Blanche-Benveniste, C., Deulofeu, J., Stéfanini, J. & van den Eynde, K. (1984). Pronom et syntaxe. L'Approche pronominale et son application au français. Paris : SELAF.

Blanche-Benveniste, C. (1985). « 'Une chose' dans la syntaxe verbale », Recherches sur le français parlé, n°7, p. 141-168.

Blanche-Benveniste, C. (2010). « Les pseudos-clivées et l'effet deux points », La Parataxe, Béguelin M.-J., Avanzi M, Corminboeuf G. (eds), Bruxelles : Peter Lang.

Culicover, P.&Jackendoff, R. (2005) Simpler syntax, Oxford UP

Deulofeu, J (2010), La greffe d'un énoncé sur une construction : une combinaison originale de parataxe et de rection Les structures La Parataxe, Béguelin M.-J., Avanzi M, Corminboeuf G. (eds), Bruxelles : Peter Lang.

Gerdes Kim & Kahane Sylvain, 2009, « Speaking in Piles. Paradigmatic Annotation of a Spoken French Corpus », Proceedings of the Fifth Corpus Linguistics Conference. Liverpool.

Roubaud, M-N. (2000). Les constructions pseudo-clivées en français contemporain, Paris : Champion.