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# On the Syntax of spoken French: Government-Units and Utterance-Units

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## Introduction

We wish to give a brief account of some conceptions that have originally been developed within the *Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe* (GARS, Aix-Marseille University), and have been adopted since then by various researchers working on the grammatical description of spoken French. Among other characteristics, the “Aix-en-Provence framework” explicitly states the need for two independent but related levels of grammatical description, namely the *microsyntactic* and *macrosyntactic* levels (Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1990, Debaisieux *dir.* 2013). Elaborating a twofold model has allowed our group to propose a descriptive method differing from traditional sentence-based models, which raises considerable challenges, especially in the domain of spoken language description. Indeed, instead of conceiving sentences or utterances as the sole “maximal-units” of syntactic description, our framework suggests that two different kinds of units should be postulated, each of them giving rise to their own principles of grammatical cohesion: Government-Units and Utterance-Units. Our paper will further illustrate the distinction between the micro- and macrosyntactic components of our framework by introducing examples mostly drawn from spoken corpora<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. On the homology between verbs and sentences

In order to introduce our descriptive framework, we will briefly comment on the notion of “verbal sentence” (or “verbal utterance”), since it is a known fact that units governed by a verb seem to be particularly frequent in spontaneous spoken French, in comparison with verbless utterances: according to Cresti & Moneglia (2005, p.224), the former account for three quarters of all of the utterances in the spoken corpora which they have investigated.

In French grammatical tradition, the notions of verbs and sentences have commonly been presented as sharing a relation of direct continuity - or homology - with one another. According to that assumption, verbs can be conceived as the *source* of the relation that brings together the various elements of a sentence, while sentence-units can in turn be seen as the *result* of the mechanism of grammatical connection initiated by the verb. For instance, a sequence like “Marie apportera des pommes à Paul” (“Mary will bring John apples”) can either be studied first by considering the verb or by considering the resulting unit, that is, the sentence as a whole: in the former perspective, one has to account for the fact that a verb like “apporter” has the capacity to govern a syntactic Subject designating the agent (“Marie”), and two Objects, designating the beneficiary (“Jean”) and the patient (“pommes”); in the latter

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<sup>1</sup> The following corpora of spoken French were used : the Champion corpus (“Champ”) [Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* (2002)]; “Corpaix” [Blanche-Benveniste (2005)] ; Corpus de Référence du Français Parlé (“CRFP”) [Delic (2004)], Rhapsodie (“Rhapso”) [Lacheret *et al.* (2014)].

perspective, it will be pointed out that the sentence-unit brings together the verb and the different elements that it governs.

Ultimately, whether one chooses to emphasize the source of the grammatical relation (the verb, which contributes to structuring the sentence) or its result (the sentence, which is structured by the verb), the hypothesis of a relation of continuity between both notions appears to remain quite central in grammatical tradition (Blanche-Benveniste, 2002, p.98).

In our view, such an assumption bears two noteworthy consequences on grammatical description, which deserve to be discussed:

a- Firstly, it implies that any kind of linguistic linkage that holds within the frontiers of a sentence (or an utterance) could be conceived as a direct manifestation of syntactic dependency, which, in the very case of verbal sentences, would necessarily be operated by the verb.

That view is notably defended by Riegel *et al.* (1994, pp.104-105), who characterize sentences as “the framework within which the network of relationships (the grammatical functions) and the classes of units occur (...).”<sup>2</sup>

Flaux (1997, p.58) similarly insists on the close relationship between sentence-units and dependency relations: “the sentence is the unit in which it is generally assumed that constraints occur between elements and in which dependency relations can be observed.”<sup>3</sup>

b- Secondly, the hypothesis under discussion suggests that there could be no relation of syntactic dependency between elements belonging to two successive sentences or utterances. In that respect, characterizing sentences as “autonomous units” in grammatical terms is a common statement:

“A sentence is an autonomous unit, which means that it has no dependency relation with its environment (...).” (Gardes-Tamine, 1988, pp.9-10)<sup>4</sup>

“The sentence constitutes the superior unit, both complete and autonomous, which can be described on the basis of a set of morphosyntactic rules.” (Riegel *et al.*, 1994, pp.104-105)<sup>5</sup>

If we consider the discursive tradition of written texts, the two generalizations which have just been mentioned may be viewed as valid in a number of cases. For instance, here is a short excerpt from a contemporary novel<sup>6</sup>, in which the double characterization proposed above is verified: on the one hand, all of the main constituents appearing in the successive sentences present strict syntactic dependencies, which means that they all can be described in relation to the verb; on the other hand, no syntactic dependency appears between successive sentences<sup>7</sup>.

(1) Après l'enterrement, je suis rentré à la maison où mon père avait vécu ses dernières années. Le corps avait été découvert une semaine auparavant. Déjà, près des meubles et dans le coin des pièces, un peu de poussière s'était accumulée ; dans l'embrasure d'une fenêtre, j'aperçus une toile d'araignée. Le temps, donc,

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<sup>2</sup> We translate. Original text: “le cadre à l'intérieur duquel se déploient et se décrivent le réseau de relations (les fonctions grammaticales) et les classes d'unité (...).”

<sup>3</sup> We translate. Original text: “Le cadre à l'intérieur duquel on considère généralement que s'exercent les contraintes entre éléments et que s'observent les relations de dépendance qui les définissent est la phrase”.

<sup>4</sup> We translate. Original text: “Une phrase est une unité autonome, ce qui signifie qu'elle n'entretient pas de relation de dépendance avec son entourage (...).”

<sup>5</sup> We translate. Original text: “La phrase constitue l'unité supérieure, à la fois complète et autonome, susceptible d'être décrite au moyen d'un ensemble de règles morpho-syntaxiques”.

<sup>6</sup> *Plateforme*, by M. Houellebecq, Flammarion, 2001, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> The sentences were identified in the most traditional way as ending with a period or a semicolon.

l'entropie et toutes ces choses prenaient doucement possession de l'endroit. Le congélateur était vide. Dans les placards de la cuisine il y avait surtout des sachets-repas individuels Weight Watchers, des boîtes de protéines aromatisées, des barres énergétiques. J'ai déambulé dans les pièces du rez-de-chaussée en grignotant un sablé au magnésium. Dans la chaufferie, j'ai fait un peu de vélo d'appartement. (...) » (M. Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, Flammarion, p.12)<sup>8</sup>

The text contains 9 graphic utterances, each of them strictly consisting of a syntactic construction formed of a verb (V) and its governed elements: Subjects (S), Objects (O) and Adjuncts (A), as detailed below:

- [Après l'enterrement,]A [je]S *suis rentré* [à la maison où mon père avait vécu ses dernières années.]O
- [Le corps]S *avait été découvert* [une semaine auparavant.]A
- [Déjà,]A [près des meubles et dans le coin des pièces,]A [un peu de poussière]S *s'était accumulée* ;
- [dans l'embrasure d'une fenêtre,]A [j']S *aperçus* [une toile d'araignée.]O
- [Le temps, donc, l'entropie et toutes ces choses]S *prenaient* [doucement]A *possession* [de l'endroit.]O
- [Le congélateur]S *était* [vide.]O
- [Dans les placards de la cuisine]A *il y avait surtout* [des sachets-repas individuels Weight Watchers, des boîtes de protéines aromatisées, des barres énergétiques.]O
- [J']S *ai déambulé* [dans les pièces du rez-de-chaussée]O [en grignotant un sablé au magnésium.]A
- [Dans la chaufferie,]A [j']S *ai fait* [un peu de vélo d'appartement.]O

By contrast with the preceding example, French spoken and written corpora regularly present linguistic productions in which the overall structure of the utterances cannot entirely be described on the basis of the constructional properties of the verb, which shows that assuming a consistent relationship between both dimensions could lead to misleading assumptions.

As a first illustration, let us consider the following written sentence, drawn from a theater play:

- (2) Je t'attendais et *le bruit de la voiture, du taxi, immédiatement, j'ai su que tu arrivais.* (J.-L. Lagarce, *Juste la fin du monde*, 1990, p.211)  
 (I was waiting for you and *the sound of the car, of the taxi, immediately, I knew that you were coming*)

The sequence we wish to comment upon is italicized. It makes no doubt that the initial NP “le bruit de la voiture, du taxi” cannot be interpreted as an utterance on its own, but is part of a larger text-unit in which it conveys the semantic value of some topical element. Nevertheless, although not autonomous in communicative terms, the NP cannot be analyzed as governed by the verb “savoir” (“know”) for reasons that will be discussed in the next section. As a matter of fact, our framework would characterize it as totally “ungoverned” (“non régi”), with the discursive status of what can be termed “hanging topic” or “nominativus pendens”. Thus, the assumption that any element appearing within the frontiers of a sentence could necessarily be

<sup>8</sup> “After the burial, I returned to the house where my father had spent his last years. The body had been discovered a week before. Already, near the furniture and in the corners of the rooms, some dust had accumulated; in a window frame, I noticed a spider’s web. Time, thus entropy, and all that sort of thing were quietly taking possession of the premises. The freezer was empty. The kitchen cupboards mainly contained individual Weight Watchers packed meals, cans of flavored protein, energy bars. I walked around the rooms on the ground floor eating a magnesium shortbread. In the boiler room, I spent some time riding an exercise bike”. [our translation]

analyzed as governed by the verb is not defensible. In our view, the relationship between the NP in (2) and the rest of the utterance radically differs from the grammatical link which can be observed between, say, a verb and one of its arguments and pertains to a totally distinct level of grammatical description.

In order to grasp this double dimension of grammatical structure, our framework suggests that a difference must be drawn between the microsyntactic and the macrosyntactic levels. This twofold conception is based on a fundamental distinction which is put forward by Blanche-Benveniste (2010) in the following quotations: syntax “in a narrow sense” (microsyntax) and the “organization of utterances” (macrosyntax) are introduced as two different fields of study:

“Syntax is to be understood here in a narrow sense, as the domain where the principal parts of speech (verbs, nouns, adjectives) exert their influence, especially the capacity to govern other elements by selecting their form as well as their main semantic types.”<sup>9</sup>

“The utterances that speakers produce contain composite elements of syntax, prosody, semantics, pragmatics, as well as a variety of discourse routines, some relations being signaled by morphologic marks, while others are not. Since such structures cannot be characterized on the sole basis of the syntactic properties of the parts of speech, several current studies have agreed to account for them at a more general level of macro-syntax.”<sup>10</sup>

That double dimension of grammatical togetherness can be briefly summarized as follows: the microsyntactic level deals with dependency relations between a syntactic head and the various governed elements: Subject, Objects and Adjuncts. On the other hand, the macrosyntactic level mainly investigates the relationships that go beyond strict government relations<sup>11</sup>.

A suggestive illustration of the micro- vs. macrosyntax opposition can be found in Deulofeu (2013, p.428), who points out that the same state of affairs could be expressed in French through two very distinct organizations, (3a) and (3b):

- (3) a. Le sol du salon de ma mère est en moquette.  
(My mother’s living room’s floor is made of carpet.)
- b. Moi, ma mère, son salon, c’est de la moquette.  
(Me, my mother, her living-room, it is carpet.)

(3a) is built according to strict microsyntactic structuring : the verb “est” (“is”) governs both a Subject constituent (“le sol du salon de ma mère”) and an Object constituent (“en moquette”), in such a way that the utterance can entirely be described on the basis of the verb’s rectional properties, just like in the Houellebecq’s sentences quoted in (1).

By contrast, (3b) is organized according to macrosyntactic principles : the relation between each successive chunk is not based on dependency relations *per se* : the 4 constructions involved in the utterance (respectively “moi”, “ma mère”, “son salon” and “c’est de la moquette”) must be seen as “autonomous” as far as microsyntax is involved. Only at the macrosyntactic level do they form a cohesive grammatical unit.

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9 We translate. Original text: “La syntaxe sera comprise ici dans un sens restreint comme le domaine où s’exercent les propriétés grammaticales des principales parties du discours (verbes, noms et adjectifs), et en particulier la propriété de régir d’autres éléments en sélectionnant à la fois leurs formes et leurs grands types sémantiques”.

10 We translate. Original text: “Les énoncés produits par les locuteurs comportent des matériaux composites de syntaxe, de prosodie, de sémantique, de pragmatique, ainsi que tout un ensemble de routines de discours, certaines relations étant signalées par des marqueurs morphologiques et d’autres non. Comme ces organisations ne peuvent pas être caractérisées uniquement par la syntaxe des catégories grammaticales, plusieurs études récentes se sont accordées pour les situer à un niveau plus englobant de macro-syntaxe”.

<sup>11</sup> This definition actually appears to be too restrictive; it will be partially reconsidered below.

Both levels of analysis give rise to their own specific “maximal unit”:

The maximal units that can be observed at the microsyntactic level are termed *Government-Units*<sup>12</sup> (GU); those concerning the macrosyntactic level are referred to as *Utterance-Units* (UU), conceived as communicatively autonomous sequences of speech, which can be characterized, among other features, according to their illocutionary value, their distributional properties and their prosodic features.

(3a) above would thus be analyzed as a single Government-Unit, due to the fact that all the elements involve dependency relations; and it also forms a single Utterance-Unit. In such a case, the micro- and macrosyntax structures perfectly match:

(4) [ [Le sol du salon de ma mère est en moquette.]<sub>GU</sub> ]<sub>UU</sub>

By contrast, (3b) still forms a single Utterance-Unit but presents a succession of four concatenated Government-Units (respectively 1 Pronominal, 2 nominal, and 1 verbal construction):

(5) [ [Moi,]<sub>GU</sub> [ma mère,]<sub>GU</sub> [son salon,]<sub>GU</sub> [c’est de la moquette.]<sub>GU</sub> ]<sub>UU</sub>

In the next pages, we will further illustrate the need for distinguishing microsyntax and macrosyntax as two independent levels of analysis, by showing that both levels give rise to their own descriptive procedures.

## 2. Dependency relations and utterance organization

Microsyntax and macrosyntax involve different descriptive methods, which will be presented now.

### 2.1. Microsyntax and Government-Units

As noted earlier, the domain of microsyntax is restricted in our approach to strict dependency relationships. But what can be regarded as a real dependency relationship obviously depends on some fundamental theoretical and methodological options. Our reference is the descriptive frame of “Pronominal approach” (Blanche-Benveniste *et al.*, 1984 & 1990, Deulofeu, 1991, Eynde & Mertens, 2003) which states that syntactic dependency (in our terms “rectional relations”) necessarily correlates with a set of paradigmatic properties, such as the equivalence with a pronominal form, the possibility to be cleft, and a few other features that will be illustrated below. The application of these criteria is useful since it enables us to distinguish between clearly dependent sequences, which pertain to the domain of (micro)syntax and can readily be analyzed as having a functional relationship to the verb (as Subject, Object or Adjunct) ; and other configurations that do not possess any paradigmatic property, and thus appear to only be linked to the neighboring constructions in a macrosyntactic way, sharing with them a mere “associative”, or paratactic, relationship<sup>13</sup>.

The following examples will be used in order to characterize syntactic dependency. (6) illustrates a Subject function, and (7) an Object function:

(6) [les gens]<sub>s</sub> me fascinent complètement (spoken, Corpaix)

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<sup>12</sup> “Unités rectionnelles” in French.

<sup>13</sup> This aspect is further discussed in Deulofeu (to be published).

([people]<sub>s</sub> totally fascinate me)

- (7) il a regardé [la voiture]<sub>o</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
(he looked at [the car]<sub>o</sub>)

Here is a set of criteria that our framework uses in order to demonstrate that “les gens” and “la voiture” are dependent on (or governed by) the verb “fasciner” (“fascinate”) and “regarder” (“watch”), respectively. Both NP’s

a- can be replaced by a pronominal form such as a clitic pronoun:

- (8) *ils* me fascinent complètement  
(*they* totally fascinate me)

- (9) il *l*’a regardée  
(he looked at *it*)

b- can occupy a focus position within a variety of utterance-types such as cleft or pseudo-cleft constructions, among others :

- (10) ce sont les gens qui me fascinent complètement (cleft)  
(it is the people who totally fascinate me)

- (11) c’est la voiture qu’il a regardée (cleft)  
(it is the car that he looked at)

- (12) ceux qui me fascinent complètement ce sont les gens (pseudo-cleft)  
(those who totally fascinate me are the people)

- (13) ce qu’il a regardé c’est la voiture (pseudo-cleft)  
(what he looked at is the car)

c- can develop a contrast between positive and negative modality:

- (14) les gens me fascinent complètement, mais pas les animaux  
(people totally fascinate me, but not animals)

- (15) il n’a pas regardé la voiture, mais le conducteur  
(he didn’t look at the car but at the driver)

d- can be modified by a paradigmatic adverbial like “seulement”, “uniquement”, “surtout” (“only”, “mostly”):

- (16) il a *uniquement* regardé la voiture  
(he *only* looked at the car)

With Subjects constituents, the paradigmatic adverbial is commonly associated with clefting:

- (17) ce sont *surtout* les gens qui me fascinent complètement  
(it is *mostly* the people who totally fascinate me)

It should be stressed at this point that the Government-Units that can be identified at the microsyntactic level, which Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* (1984, p.35) regard as the “basic syntactic unit”<sup>14</sup>, do not necessary coincide with sentences or utterances. This can be illustrated by:

- (18) quand je sors de la consultation je suis euphorique \ parce que j’ai aimé être avec les gens (spoken, Champ) (\ indicates the presence of a conclusive prosodic contour)

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<sup>14</sup> “L’unité syntaxique première”.

(when my consultations with patients are over I feel euphoric \ because I have enjoyed being with people)

Although (18) is clearly realized as the succession of two (prosodic) utterances, it still consists of just one Government-Unit, due to the fact that the constituent present in the second utterance (“parce que j’ai aimé être avec les gens”) can readily be analyzed as governed by the verb “aimer” (“appreciate”), with the functional status of an Adjunct. As a matter of fact, the paradigmatic properties that have been listed above, such as the possibility to be cleft, would apply to the *Parce que*-clause in (18):

(19) c’est parce que j’ai aimé être avec les gens que je suis euphorique  
(it is because I have enjoyed being with people that I feel euphoric)

Examples of this type illustrate what constitutes in our view a fundamental aspect of grammatical organization: just because a linguistic sequence is realized as a series of several Utterance-Units does not mean that no microsyntactic connection can be observed between the successive units. To put it differently, the right end of an Utterance-Unit does not necessarily constitute a frontier for microsyntactic relations. That kind of “mismatch” between UUs and GUs has often been considered as representing a specific challenge for linguistic description, which many linguists have attempted to solve by putting great faith on the notion of ellipsis: the proponents of this conception would certainly state that the second utterance in (18) lacks its subject and verb, and could consequently suggest to re-introduce them for the purpose of the analysis:

(20) je suis euphorique / (*je le suis*) parce que j’ai aimé être avec les gens  
(I feel euphoric / (*I feel that way*) because I have enjoyed being with people)

The relative independence between micro- and macrosyntactic levels allows us to avoid generalizing explanations based on ellipsis, which is in our view a much valuable simplification for the description of spoken data.

## 2.2. Macrosyntax and Utterance-Units

In contrast with the microsyntactic level, macrosyntax is intended to “describe groupings of constructions which constitute the larger units that texts are composed of” (Deulofeu 2013, p.438)<sup>15</sup>. As C. Blanche-Benveniste (2010) points out in the quotation given above, the utterances found in spontaneous speech are characterized by their inherently composite nature. Thus, the domain of macrosyntactic linkage will necessarily bring us to consider “heterogeneous [...] features (morphemes, lexical contrasts, syntactic parallelisms, prosody and rhythmic effects) involved in the segmentation and hierarchy of text-units” (Deulofeu 2013, p.439).

One of the major goals of macrosyntactic description is to get a better understanding of the diverse modes of paratactic connection found in spoken (and written) corpora. The most relevant linguistic features to be used at that level relate to distributional constraints affecting the shape of the observed sequences, as well as the degree of enunciative and illocutionary autonomy of the successive GUs (Bilger *et al.*, 2013). On the basis of such criteria, three main types of macrosyntactic configurations can be identified: unilateral groupings, bilateral groupings, and parallel structures.

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<sup>15</sup> We translate. Original text: “décrire les regroupements de constructions qui constituent les grandes unités dont sont faits les textes”.



### 2.2.1. Unilateral groupings

The most frequent macrosyntactic groupings, which also appear to be highly variable as to their form, present a *unilateral relationship* between the consecutive elements of an utterance, meaning that one unit, which is described as the “Nucleus”, is likely to form an autonomous utterance, whereas the surrounding ones are not. Unilateral groupings may manifest themselves in several ways:

#### 2.2.1.1. Nucleus and satellites

They can be realized as a sequence of successive units according to the following pattern:

[Pre-Nucleus – Nucleus – Post-Nucleus]<sup>16</sup>

What distinguishes those three units relates to the modality that they are liable to express, some prosodic properties, and their linear position:

-The Nucleus is the basic macrosyntactic unit. It bears an illocutionary value which can be interpreted as a speech act (declarative, question, exclamation), and, as mentioned above, is likely to form an utterance on its own. Prosodically, it is associated with a choice of terminal contours that make up a paradigm of prosodic forms, each of them being related to an illocutionary value.

- The units appearing on both sides of the Nucleus are referred to as “Satellites elements” (Debaiseux dir., 2013), namely “pre-” and “post-Nucleus” depending on their distribution<sup>17</sup>. In contrast with the Nucleus, they bear no illocutionary value: as Verstraete (2007) puts it, such elements seem to be “deactivated” as to their capacity to convey any kind of illocutionary content. As a consequence, they cannot constitute an independent communicative unit.

Here is a tentative list of some commonly attested structures involving unilateral groupings between a Nucleus and its surrounding Satellite units. The characterization given for each type describes in a very sketchy way the form and value of the Satellite:

a- Prepositional phrases endowed with an enunciative value:

(21) [par définition]<sub>preNcl</sub> [ils ne parlent pas français]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Rhapso)  
([by definition] [they do not speak French])

(22) [d'après vous]<sub>preNcl</sub> [quels ont été les jouets les plus vendus]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Champ)  
([according to you] [what were the most purchased toys])

(23) [ça dépend des dialectes]<sub>Ncl</sub> [à mon avis]<sub>postNcl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
([it depends on the dialects] [in my opinion])

b-Prepositional phrases which initiate / reactivate a theme of discourse:

(24) donc euh [pour parler de ma première journée de travail]<sub>preNcl</sub> + euh [j'étais parti le matin très tôt parce que on commençait le travail aux alentours de six heures du matin]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Champ)  
(so err [to speak about my first day of work] + err [I left home very early because we started work at around six in the morning])

<sup>16</sup> Such a presentation, which proposes to describe the form of the utterances as a sequence of three successive elements, is obviously related to other proposals such as [Support – Apport – Report] (Perrot, 1993) ; [Préambule – Rhème – Postrhème] (Morel & Danon-Boileau, 1998) ; [Topic – Comment – Appendice] (Cresti, 1995) ; [Comment – Topic – AntiTopic] (Lambrecht, 1994) ; [Preface – Body – Tag] (Biber *et al.*, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> “Intra-Nucleus units” constitute a third type of satellite unit, which is located inside the Nucleus unit. For lack of space, we will not illustrate them any further.

- (25) [et pour ce qui est aussi de l'extérieur]<sub>preNcl</sub> [là j'ai parlé tout à l'heure des Dispensaires d'Hygiène Mentale]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Champ)  
 ([and for what concerns exterior areas] [I mentioned earlier mental health clinics])

c- Noun phrases with the status of a nominativus pendens / hanging topic (see (2)):

- (26) [les maternelles]<sub>preNcl</sub> euh [il y a suffisamment d'enseignants]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Rhapso)  
 ([the nursery schools] err [there are enough teachers])
- (27) [cette maison]<sub>preNcl</sub> [tout est à refaire]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Groupe de Fribourg, 2013, p.43)  
 ([this house] [everything needs to be redone])

d- Ungoverned Conjunctional clauses:

- (28) [comme j'étais pas inscrite]<sub>preNcl</sub> [j'ai pas pu y aller]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, CRFP)  
 ([since I hadn't registered] [I couldn't go there])
- (29) [je suis complètement responsable]<sub>Ncl</sub> [puisque je suis le président du club]<sub>postNcl</sub>  
 (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([I am totally responsible] [since I am the club president])

e- "Unmarked conditionals":

In the following structures, which are usually referred to as "unmarked conditionals", an "assumption" is introduced in the first member, and its "consequence" in the second member:

- (30) [je serais une femme]<sub>preNcl</sub> [j'accepterais pas ce principe]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Blasco-Dulbecco, 1999)  
 ([if I were a woman (lit: I would be a woman)] [I would not accept this principle])
- (31) [je lis une lettre]<sub>preNcl</sub> [il y a des fautes d'orthographe partout]<sub>preNcl</sub> + [eh ben je peux pas m'empêcher de prendre mon stylo et de les corriger]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([I read a letter] [it is full of spelling mistakes] [well I can't help taking my pen and correct them])

f- Presentational constructions:

In the example below, the first sequence is governed by "il y a" ("there is"), which introduces the topic of the utterance, thus getting what traditional grammar considers as a "presentational" value. In such constructions, "Il y a" does not possess its usual syntactic properties, one crucial limitation being that it cannot be in the negative form:

- (32) [il y a des des chambres]<sub>preNcl</sub> [vraiment euh + tu as pas envie de faire un coup de balai]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([there are bedrooms] [really er + you don't feel like sweeping the floor])

#### 2.2.1.2. Introduced Nucleus

The second type of Unilateral grouping we wish to mention involves two successive Nucleus units. It can be represented by the following pattern:

[Nucleus – Introduced Nucleus]

In such configurations, the second Nucleus unit is typically introduced by a subordinating conjunction “recategorized as a discourse connector”<sup>18</sup> (Bilger *et al.* 2013 : 78). The “Introduced Nucleus” is characterized by the fact that a) in contrast with Satellites units, it bears its own illocutionary value, which can in some cases be different from that of the preceding Nucleus; and b) it is communicatively dependent on the preceding Nucleus unit.

The French conjunction “parce que” (“because”) is well known for behaving in such a way, notably in informal conversational speech, as has been demonstrated by Debaisieux (2004, 2013 *inter alia*). This is the case in (33), in which the *Parce que*-clause is endowed with a declarative illocutionary value (whereas the preceding Nucleus is a question):

- (33) bon alors [est-ce que vous voulez du fromage ?]<sub>Ncl</sub> [parce qu’il y a un dessert consistant]<sub>IntroNcl</sub> (uttered at the end of a meal, Debaisieux 2013, p.213)  
(well then [do you want some cheese ?] [because there is a copious dessert])

In the following example, the Introduced Nucleus acts as a command (with the verb “oublier” being in the imperative mode):

- (34) [vos clients euh pourront euh à cet endroit admirer la vue sur le lac et le barrage]<sub>Ncl</sub> [parce que n'oubliez pas que le le Muséoscope surplombe le lac de Serre Ponçon]<sub>IntroNcl</sub> (spoken, CRFP)  
([your customers er can er in this place admire the sight on the lake and the dam] [because don’t forget that the Muséoscope overhangs the lake of Serre Ponçon])

Other subordinating conjunctions, like “même si” (“even if”) behave in quite the same way<sup>19</sup>:

- (35) [la langue maternelle de mon père et la langue maternelle de ma mère étaient l'arabe]<sub>Ncl</sub> [même s'ils parlaient le français absolument parfaitement sans accent]<sub>IntroNcl</sub> (spoken, CRFP)  
([my father’s native language and my mother’s native language were Arabic] [even though they spoke perfect French without an accent])

As a last example, let us consider the “quand” (“when”) conjunction in the following written utterance:

- (36) [Marie partit en chantant]<sub>Ncl</sub> [quand soudain elle vit une petite fille assise sur un tronc d’arbre.]<sub>IntroNcl</sub> (written, 10 years old, the spelling was corrected)  
([Marie went away while singing] [when suddenly she saw a little girl sitting on a tree trunk])

In that type of constructions, the conjunctive clause could not be analyzed as governed by the verbe “partit” (“went away”), which is attested by the impossibility to pronominalize or cleave the sequence:

- (37) \*Marie partit en chantant à ce moment-là<sup>20</sup>  
(\*Marie went away then)  
(38) \*c’est quand soudain elle vit une petite fille assise sur un tronc d’arbre que Marie partit en chantant  
(\*it is when suddenly she saw a little girl sitting on a tree trunk that Marie went away while singing)

<sup>18</sup> “recatégorisée comme connecteur discursif”.

<sup>19</sup> Although, in contrast with the *parce que*-clauses, *même si*-clauses are only likely to bear a declarative illocutionary value.

<sup>20</sup> Though not unacceptable in itself, the pronominal version bears no correspondance with the original utterance.

What makes this type of discursive structure original is that it combines two successive Nucleus units which introduce two concomitant states of affairs: the first one provides some kind of temporal frame; the second one denotes an event that occurs in a sudden manner inside that temporal frame.

In all such instances, the conjunctive sequence is totally distinct from what precedes it, both regarding microsyntax (since it cannot be analyzed as an Adjunct to the verb present in the first Nucleus unit), and macrosyntax (since it constitutes, from our perspective, a Nucleus unit on its own).

### 2.2.2. *Bilateral groupings*

Other types of macrosyntactic groupings have a *bilateral* nature, which means that the relationship between the successive units is such that the first unit cannot appear without the second one, while the second unit cannot appear without the first one. A typical instance can be found in the so-called correlative constructions in “plus... plus” (“the more... the more”) that have been described as forming a “complex Nucleus” (Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1990, p.118) :

- (39) plus les élèves vieillissent / et moins ils parlent (spoken, Corpaix)  
(the older pupils get / and the less they speak)

A second illustration can be found in quite peculiar structures in which a verb-phrase is strictly duplicated without any discourse marker in between, and uttered as just one utterance:

- (40) *il était comme ça / il était comme ça* + je ne pouvais rien changer (spoken, CRFP)  
(that’s how he was / that’s how he was + I couldn’t change anything)
- (41) vous ne les aimez pas / vous ne les aimez pas (spoken, television)  
(you don’t like them / you don’t like them)

Such utterances have a very distinctive meaning associated with a sense of resignation on the part of the speaker, who expresses the fact that “things simply have to be accepted as they are”. This semantic value implies that both GUs are realized, in a bilateral grouping, otherwise the particular meaning associated with the structure would be absent.

### 2.2.3. *Parallel structuring*

Another distinctive type of macrosyntactic configuration is essentially based on *parallel structuring* (Sabio 2011 & to appear). Let us consider the following instances:

- (42) j’ai pas vu grand chose encore / j’ai vu que la place (spoken, Corpaix)  
(I didn’t see much so far / I only saw the square)
- (43) je parle pas de l’autoroute hein / je parle de la rocade (spoken, CRFP)  
(I am not speaking about the motorway / I am speaking about the bypass)

We consider those to be instances of parallel structuring ; in that case, the macrosyntactic combination is based on the paradigmatic link which holds between the two successive units. Paradigmatically organized combinations are related to various effects of lexical and syntactic symmetry. Other closely related structures signal their contrastive value in a more symmetrical way, by using a specific morpheme at the beginning of each successive Verb-Phrase, like “d’un côté” (“on the one hand”) and “de l’autre côté” (“on the other hand”):

- (44) bon d’un côté il y a un boulot social / de l’autre côté c’est un hum c’est un versant  
qui est plus culturel (spoken, Corpaix)  
(well on the one hand there is social work / on the other hand this is mm this is a

more cultural dimension)

In the last example below, the subordinating conjunction “alors que” (“whereas”) contributes to express a semantic contrast between two GUs in quite the same way (ex. Lafontaine, 2015):

- (45) Certains bons films ne se regardent qu’une fois ou deux, / alors que d’autres peuvent se laisser regarder cent fois. (written, Lafontaine 2015, p.92)  
(Some good films are to be watched only once or twice, / whereas other films can be watched a hundred times.)

We do not claim that the preceding instances give a fully comprehensive view of the various forms of macrosyntactic linkage. Our main point was to emphasize the fact that, as far as macrosyntax is concerned, the modes of connection between successive units are based on principles that largely differ from those observed in microsyntactic government. It is only by observing the combinations of the strictly microsyntactic properties of the constructions and of the modes of macrosyntactic linkage at play in text-units that one can expect to obtain a better understanding of the variety of the possible utterance-types, the typology of which still remains to be done.

### 3. Overlap between macrosyntactic configurations and microsyntactic relationships

Although macrosyntax primarily concerns grammatical “relations that go beyond strict microsyntactic dependency” (Pietrandrea *et al.*, 2014, p.343), as has been illustrated in the preceding section, it must be emphasized that, in our framework, macrosyntactic relations are also likely to apply to elements that are joined by microsyntactic relationship. Three sorts of “ungrouped configurations” can be mentioned.

#### 3.1. Extraction of a governed element as a Nuclus-unit

A classic example would be cleft constructions. An instance like

- (46) c’est à Paul que j’ai parlé  
(it is to Paul that I spoke)

must necessarily be described as a single Government-Unit, in which the verb “parler” (“speak”) governs both a Subject (“je”) and an Object (“à Paul”). Yet, that GU manifests itself as a sequence of two successive macrosyntactic units : Nucleus (“c’est à Paul”) and post-Nucleus (“que j’ai parlé”), the interesting fact being that the verb “parler”, which remains central in microsyntactic terms, appears to be somewhat “downgraded” at the macrosyntactic level since it is realized outside the Nucleus unit. That example allows us to generalize the fact that, besides the various types of macrosyntactic groupings illustrated earlier, in which several constructions sharing no government relationship are integrated inside a single Utterance-unit, macrosyntactic structuring can perform just the opposite : separate, or “ungroup”, elements belonging to the same Government-Unit into distinct macrosyntactic units. From that point of view, it appears that macrosyntax cannot simply be seen as an extension of syntax that would specifically apply to relations beyond dependency. Rather, micro- and macrosyntax can be viewed as two modules that are likely to “overlap” (Blanche-Benveniste, 2002). This is what we attempted to show (Sabio, 2006) regarding the case of Object fronting in French. Consider (47), uttered as an answer to the question “how old is he?”:

- (47) huit ans il a (spoken, Corpaix)

(eight years old he is)

Although it is in a fronted position, the initial NP “huit ans” (“eight years”) still functions as an Object governed by the verb “avoir”, while acquiring the value of a Nucleus element at the macrosyntactic level; as for the subsequent Subject and Verb, they both appear in a post-Nucleus unit:

- (48) [huit ans]<sub>Ncl</sub> [il a]<sub>postNcl</sub>  
([eight years old] [he is])

This analysis is supported by the fact that the fronted Object is perfectly compatible with a variety of negative or restrictive adverbials, which characterizes the Nucleus units:

- (49) à peine huit ans / même pas huit ans / que huit ans il a  
(barely eight years old / not even eight years old / only eight years old he is)

By contrast, the Subject-Verb sequence shows signs of macrosyntactic “weakening”: it cannot be combined with the “est-ce que” interrogative mark, and it seems to refuse lexical Subjects...:

- (50) ? à peine 8 ans est-ce qu’il a ?  
(barely eight years old is he?)  
(51) ? à peine 8 ans Jules a  
(barely eight years old Jules is)

Consequently, a sequence such as “huit ans” given in (47) possesses a double value: a fully microsyntactic one (considering that it is governed by the verb), and a fully macrosyntactic one (as far as the utterance structure is concerned).

The type of ungrouped configuration which has been illustrated so far with clefting and Object fronting is characterized by the fact that one of the constituents, namely an Object constituent (“à Paul” in (46) and “huit ans” in (47)) is “promoted” as the Nucleus of the utterance whereas the remaining elements of the GU (including the verb) are expressed in a Satellite unit.

### 3.2. Extraction of a governed element as a Satellite-unit

Other types of ungrouped configurations are attested, such as the fact for a constituent which is part of a Government-Unit to be rejected outside the Nucleus unit. Let us compare (52) and (53):

- (52) [il n’a pas vu Paul à Paris (mais à Londres)]<sub>Ncl</sub>  
([he didn’t see Paul in Paris (but in London)])  
(53) [à Paris,]<sub>preNcl</sub> [il n’a pas vu Paul]<sub>Ncl</sub>  
([in Paris] [he didn’t see Paul])

In our perspective, the Prepositional Phrase “à Paris” works in both cases as an Adjunct to the verb “voir” (“see”). But their macrosyntactic integration within the utterance differs: in (52), the locative sequence is part of the Nucleus while in (53), it is realized as a pre-Nucleus unit. The conjunctive clause in the following instance behaves in the same way: it appears outside the Nucleus unit in spite of its being governed by the verb.

- (54) [quand ils vont rentrer dans la vie active]<sub>preNcl</sub> [ça va être dur pour eux]<sub>Ncl</sub>  
(spoken, Corpaix)  
([when they enter the labor market] [it will be hard for them])

It follows from the above that Satellite elements (this is particularly true for pre-Nucleus units) can be of two types regarding their microsyntactic properties: ungoverned (*cf.* 21-32 in section 2.2.1.1) and governed by a verb as in the previous instance. It is no surprise then that pre-Nucleus units are likely to accumulate in a complex way at the beginning of utterances<sup>21</sup>, as illustrated in (3b) above. Here are two more examples of successive pre-Nucleus units:

(55) [moi]<sub>preNcl</sub> [l'institutrice]<sub>preNcl</sub> [quand elle m'interrogeait]<sub>preNcl</sub> je perdais  
tous mes moyens (ex. Benzitoun, 2006)  
([me] [the teacher] [when she questioned me] I would go blank)

(56) [des fois même]<sub>preNcl</sub> [mon père]<sub>preNcl</sub> [quand il voulait pas qu'on entende quelque chose]<sub>preNcl</sub> il parlait patois à ma mère (spoken, Corpaix)  
([sometimes] [my father] [when he didn't want us to overhear something] he spoke to my mother in local dialect)

### 3.3. Realization of a GU as a sequence of Nucleus-units

The last type of ungrouped configuration which will be briefly mentioned results in the production of a Government-Unit as a sequence of several (usually two) successive Nucleus units. In that case, the detached sequence is once again syntactically dependent on a verb (in contrast with the [Nucleus - Introduced Nucleus] configurations illustrated in 2.2.1.2), but it appears to be completely isolated from the rest of the construction, in such a way as to form a completely independent macrosyntactic Utterance-Unit. Such examples have sometimes been analyzed as “delayed complements” or “supplements”. They correspond to what Bally (1932, p.59) called “épexégèse”, which he presented as the addition of an element to an already complete utterance, “intended to complement and explain the initial enunciation afterwards”<sup>22</sup>.

Example (18), repeated below, provides a typical illustration. Prosodic cues attest that the *parce que*-clause is realized as an independent Nucleus Unit<sup>23</sup>:

(57) [quand je sors de la consultation]<sub>preNcl</sub> [je suis euphorique]<sub>Ncl</sub> [*parce que j'ai aimé être avec les gens*]<sub>Ncl</sub>  
([when my consultations with patients are over] [I feel euphoric] [*because I have enjoyed being with people*])

In conversations, the delayed element takes the form of a “supplement” which is given by one of the speakers:

(58) Sp1: vous comprenez que ça fait quand même une somme + je j'ai acheté des lunettes euh  
Sp2: oui + *qui sont très peu remboursées hein* (spoken, Corpaix)  
(Sp1 : you understand that it's pretty expensive + I I bought glasses err  
Sp2: yes + *which are not covered well by health insurance*)

In writing, a similar type of segmentation may be achieved by punctuation marks:

<sup>21</sup> For the sake of simplicity, we consider here that the examples of pre-Nucleus units are merely enumerated as successive units; but as is suggested in Blanche-Benveniste (2002), successive pre-Nucleus units often appear to be hierarchically organized, what can be demonstrated on semantic, distributional and prosodic grounds. This aspect will not be developed here.

<sup>22</sup> We translate. Original text: “destiné à compléter, à expliquer après coup la première énonciation ».

<sup>23</sup> The delayed elements are italicized in the examples.

- (59) Baga: Et si je ne faisais que dormir comme toi qui est-ce qui lèverait les impôts ? Tu dépenses tout pour bouffer.  
 Le roi: *Parce que je n'ai rien d'autre à faire*<sup>24</sup>.  
 (Baga: If I spent my time sleeping as you do who would levy the taxes? You spend all the money on food.  
 The king: *Because I have nothing else to do.*)

That kind of delayed Nucleus units frequently appear to be preceded by a variety of elements, such as a connective morpheme like “et” (“and”) or “mais” (“but”):

- (60) [donc moi j'y j'y j'y vais plusieurs fois]<sub>Ncl</sub> [*mais en touriste*]<sub>Ncl</sub> (ex. Tanguy 2010, p.1423)  
 ([so me I I I go there several times] [*but as a tourist*])

a negation mark:

- (61) [c'est un métier pénible d'accord]<sub>Ncl</sub> + [*mais pas parce que c'est un métier privé ou parce que c'est un métier public*]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([it is a tough job ok] + [*but not because it is in the private sector or because it is in the public sector*])

or a paradigmatic adverbial like “seulement” (“only”) or “surtout” (“mostly”):

- (62) [j'aimais pas du tout les cours de français]<sub>Ncl</sub> + [*surtout quand on faisait des dictées*]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([I didn't like French classes] + [*especially when we had dictations*])  
 (63) [les jeunes en Angleterre]<sub>preNcl</sub> euh [quand ils parlent]<sub>preNcl</sub> [c'est fou]<sub>Ncl</sub> [faut s'accrocher pour comprendre]<sub>Ncl</sub> [*surtout quand tu es pas anglais*]<sub>Ncl</sub> (spoken, Corpaix)  
 ([the young people in England] er [when they speak] [it's amazing] [you have to struggle to understand] [*especially when you are not English*])

#### 4. Synthesis and concluding remarks

We began this paper by recalling that grammatical tradition had often regarded the notions of verbs and sentences as sharing some kind of homological relationship with one another, one major assumption being that (verbal) sentence-units could exhaustively be described on the basis of the grammatical relationships initiated by the verb. The old-established expertise developed by the *Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe* in the domain of spoken French description has convinced us that extreme care should be taken in that matter since, as we have attempted to show, both the descriptive procedures and the “maximal” grammatical units which can be postulated largely differ according to the point of view we choose to emphasize: as a specific grammatical category, verbs obviously involve some dependency relations, which our framework accounts for by using several “paradigmatic” criteria such as the correspondence with pronominal forms, among others; but the way in which the various kinds of Government-Units (be they verbal, nominal, adjectival, etc.) combine in actual utterances, sentences or other sorts of larger text-units goes well beyond the issue of syntactic dependency, and constitutes a specific domain of grammatical togetherness. As has been pointed out, what makes utterances “cohesive” units owes much to diverse kinds of macrosyntatic - or discursive – linking strategies, involving the grouping of successive unrelated Government-Units, diverse effects of parallel structuring based on lexical and

<sup>24</sup> Architruc, R. Pinget, Ed. Minuit, pp.16-17.



syntactic symmetry, and ungrouped configurations in which Government-Units appear to be segmented into a sequence of macrosyntactic units.

As a final remark, we wish to point out that, although it has eventually come to constitute a somewhat “theoretical” option, the initial attempt to separate micro- and macro-syntactic levels of analysis has a truly practical dimension in that it does originate from actual spoken corpora observation: it is a well known fact that many linguists working on spoken data have felt the need for new kinds of descriptive units for the simple reason that the notion of sentence is almost unanimously rejected as being inadequate. As Leech puts it, (2000, p.704):

“The best way of persuading someone of the nonviability of sentences in spontaneous spoken language is simply to ask them to segment a transcription of spontaneous speech into sentences. The segmentation is likely to end up being arbitrary in a number of ways.”

Consequently, many researchers have advocated that it was much simpler to conduct the analysis starting with “small” units (such as Government-Units), and only then to consider the way in which utterances are organized. Such is Miller and Weinert’s position, who chose to start the description of their English corpora by identifying successive “clauses”, under the argument that they are easy to pinpoint (1998, p.30):

“The central problem is that it is far from evident that the language system of spoken English has sentences, for the simple reason that text-sentences are hard to locate in spoken texts. Clauses are easily recognized: even where pauses and a pitch contour with appropriate scope are missing, a given verb and its complements can be picked out”.

The Fribourg Group (Groupe de Fribourg, 2012, p.154) also makes use of two different units for spoken data description, arguing in the same way that the analysis should first consider the smallest units (the “clauses”), and the larger-text-units (the “périodes”) in a second step. A similar “bottom up” methodological option was more recently defended by the proponents of the Rhapsodie annotation program, who first isolated the rectional units (Pietrandrea *et al.*, 2014).

What is at stake in the micro / macro distinction is the fundamental issue of the boundary between grammatical relationships and discourse structure: the conceptions based on an homologous relation between verbs and sentences lead the researchers to divide both domains in a clear-cut, even simplistic, manner: what is inside a sentence would by definition pertain to the domain of grammar, whereas the relationships beyond sentences could be nothing but “discursive”. The text-units observed in spoken corpora exhibit a much more complex linguistic behavior, showing dependency relations that stretch beyond individual utterances, and, conversely, discursive connections that manifest themselves within a single utterance.

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## Abstract

This paper gives an account of the research carried out by the *Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe* (GARS, Aix-Marseille University), in the field of spoken French description. Our framework explicitly states the need for two independent but related levels of grammatical description, namely the *microsyntactic* and *macrosyntactic* levels. Elaborating a twofold model has allowed us to propose a descriptive method differing from traditional sentence-based analyses, which raise considerable difficulties, especially in the domain of spoken language description. Regarding the “maximal-units” of syntactic description, our framework suggests that two different kinds of units should be postulated: Government-Units and Utterance-Units. The paper illustrates the distinction between the micro- and macro-syntactic components by introducing examples mostly drawn from spoken French corpora.

## Key-words

French, spoken language, syntax, dependency, macrosyntax.

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