

Acquisition of syntactic topic marking in L2 French*

Astrid Ferdinand
University of Amsterdam

1. Introduction

In order to use a second language as a means of communication, the L2 learner has to acquire the ability to make clear what each sentence is about. Put differently, he has to mark what is the topic of the sentence. The sentence topic is here defined as ‘the thing that the proposition expressed by the sentence is about’ (Lambrecht 1994). Marking the sentence topic can be done syntactically, lexically, morphologically, or phonologically. This article focuses on syntactic topic marking. Syntactic topic marking has two sides, a pragmatic side and a syntactic side. The pragmatic notion topic may be universally available to the language user, whereas its formal, syntactic expression is language specific. (Hendriks 2000:392). Also, within the same language, topics may be syntactically coded (for instance by a dislocation) or only be implicated (in a sentence order that is unmarked with respect to topic marking). It is still unclear how Dutch L2 learners of French use syntax to code topics in the L2, and whether they use language specific L1 or L2 structures to mark topics. The question that will be addressed in this article is: How do Dutch L2 speakers of French acquire syntactic topic marking? We focus on the following triggers for topic marking: reintroducing a topic, selecting a topic from a set, and contrastively marking a topic.

1.1 Topic marking in spoken French

Lambrecht (1994) argues that, during discourse, the speaker constantly makes assumptions about the ‘active’ or ‘non-active’ state of the topic referent in the mind of the listener. Active and non-active topics have different forms. If the speaker assumes that the topic is non-active, he will express it by a nominal constituent, like ‘Jean’ in (1):

- (1) Jean a pris le train.
Jean has taken the train
'Jean took the train.'

Example (1) contains the canonical SVO sentence pattern, used mostly in written French. In spoken French, this sentence can be made even more explicit pragmatically, as in (2), where the speaker explicitly introduces a non-active topic with an (*il*) *y a* 'there is' cleft:

- (2) Y a Jean qui a pris le train.
there has Jean who has taken the train
'Jean took the train.'

Active topics are marked differently. If the speaker assumes that the topic is active in the mind of the listener, he will express it by a light pronoun, as in (3):

- (3) Il est parti hier.
he is left yesterday
'He left yesterday.'

A pragmatically correct sequence of sentences, then, is the one in (4); in the first sentence a non-active topic is introduced by a noun, and in the second sentence the topic, which is supposed to be active now, is referred to by a light pronoun:

- (4) Y a Jean qui a pris le train. Il est parti hier.
there has Jean who has taken the train he is left yesterday
'Jean took the train. He left yesterday'

If the topic is supposed to be active (or accessible), the speaker will use a light pronoun. However, if he wants to put a slight emphasis on the active topic, he may use a dislocation (Lambrecht 1994). Such emphasis may be necessary for disambiguation when several topics subsequently play a role in discourse. A topic that was introduced some time ago may have been followed by other topics. When the speaker wants to reintroduce the first topic, he may use a left or right dislocation (Lambrecht 1994, Hendriks 2000). Dislocations are topic marking constructions. A topic constituent (that is: a constituent that the sentence is about) is placed outside the sentence structure (Frei 1926). Example (5) shows left dislocation and right dislocation. The pronominal clitic subject *il* 'he' is coreferential with the nominal expression *Jean* 'Jean' to the left or to the right:

reintroduction

- (5) Y a Jean qui est allé en vacances. Il a laissé ses chiens chez nous.
there has Jean who is gone on vacation he has left his dogs with us
Puis, Jean, il_i est allé en Espagne. / Puis, il_i est allé en Espagne, Jean_i.
then Jean he is gone to Spain then he is gone to Spain Jean
'Jean went on a holiday. He left his dogs at our place. Then he went to Spain.'

In fact, two topics have been established in the discourse preceding the dislocation in (5), namely *Jean* 'Jean' and *ses chiens* 'his dogs'. By using a dislocation, the speaker accentuates the fact that he refers to the first topic. Another case in which dislocation may emphasize a topic is the following. The speaker selects a topic from a set of active or accessible referents that have been introduced in the discourse simultaneously, or are present in the extralinguistic context. To select one topic, a left or right dislocation can be used. An example is given in (6):

selection from a set

- (6) Voilà de belles pommes. Celle-là_i, elle_i est la plus grande. / Elle_i est
look-there some beautiful apples that-one she is the most big she is
la plus grande, celle-là_i.
the most big that-one
'What a beautiful apples. That one is the biggest one.'

Finally, left dislocation can be used to put contrastive stress on an active or accessible topic. The use of right dislocation is excluded here (Lambrecht 1984):

contrast

- (7) Y a mes voisins qui sont en vacances. LE VOISIN_i, il_i fait du
there has my neighbours who are on holiday the neighbour_[M] he does of-the
ski et LA VOISINE_j, elle_j ne fait jamais rien. / *Il_i fait du ski, LE VOISIN_i,
ski and the neighbour_[F] she *ne* does never nothing
et elle_j ne fait jamais rien, LA VOISINE_j.
'My neighbours are on a holiday. THE MAN goes skiing and THE WOMAN doesn't
ever do anything.'

In spoken French, dislocations (and the presentational (*il*) *y a* cleft and *c'est* cleft) are used very often instead of the canonical SVO order. Lambrecht (1984) cites François (1974), who, in his corpus of spoken French, finds only 46 subject NPs, among 1.440 NPs, and Jean Jean (1981), who finds that only about 2.5% of all subjects are full NPs in the corpora she analyzed.

1.2 Topic marking in spoken Dutch

Syntactic topic marking in spoken Dutch differs from syntactic topic marking in spoken French as follows. In the first place, Dutch has topicalization¹, which preposes the (unaccented or contrastively accented) topic to the first position within the clause, before the finite verb, which is impossible in French:²

- (8) Dat meisje/DAT MEISJE ken ik.
that girl /THAT GIRL I know
'I know that girl/THAT GIRL.'

A further difference is that in Dutch a left-dislocated element is coreferential with a deictic pronoun, such as *die* 'that-one_[M/F SING/PL]' or *dat* 'that-one_[N SING]',

whereas in French non-deictic clitic pronouns are used:

- (9) Jan/JAN, die is vertrokken.
Jan/JAN that-one is left
'Jan/JAN has left.'
- (10) Dat meisje/DAT MEISJE, dat ken ik.
that girl /THAT GIRL that-one I know
'I know that girl/THAT GIRL.'

Finally, spoken Dutch has never been described as a language in which dislocations have replaced the canonical sentence pattern. Jansen (1981) finds only 20% of left-dislocated NPs in his corpus of spoken Dutch.

1.3 Hypotheses on the learnability of L2 French topic marking for speakers of Dutch

Given the differences with respect to topic marking syntax between Dutch and French, speakers of Dutch acquiring French will have to overcome a double learnability problem. In the first place they have to acquire the syntactic structure of French. They have to have enough syntactic structure to form dislocations, and be aware of the non-verb second character of French, in order not to use topicalization. They also have to be aware of the fact that spoken French hardly uses the canonical SVO pattern, but in mostly replaces it by dislocations and cleft sentences. Second, Dutch L2 learners of French have to acquire which syntactic construction expresses which topic marking function. They have to learn which constructions are used for reintroducing a topic, selecting a topic from a set, and contrastively marking a topic.

In learning the language specific syntax of topic marking, the learner may use both L1 syntactic knowledge and L2 syntactic input. In L1 speakers of Dutch, L1 syntactic knowledge may cause transfer of topicalization to L2 French. The L2 input contains cues about French syntax. If these cues are integrated in L2 French, it is expected that typically French constructions will occur, such as clefts. Both L1 transfer and L2 input may cause use of dislocations in L2 French, since dislocations occur both in Dutch and in French.

2. Methods

A test was designed in which topics had to be marked. This test consisted of an elicitation task containing picture stories with cues for reintroduction, selection from a set and contrast. The picture stories did not contain any text and the subjects were asked to tell the story. The test contained three stories that had to be described

in French, each containing one of the three triggers. It also contained three parallel stories (with the same triggers) that had to be described in Dutch. A control test, containing similar picture stories without the cues, was designed as well.

The Dutch L2 learners of French that were tested were secondary school pupils, 5th grade (test $n=5$; control test $n=1$), and 6th grade (test $n=7$; control test $n=2$). The subjects that participated had taken French as an examination subject. Also, the three French stories were tested with monolingual native speakers of French ($n=3$) who were French university students. The L2 learners that were included in the study were all native speakers of Dutch. Some of them practised speaking French as a second language with friends or family members or during their vacations in France. Among the native French group, one subject did not speak Dutch at all, another knew only some memorized phrases, and the third knew Dutch at an advanced degree, but used nearly only French in his daily life.

During the test, two investigators were present. The first investigator handed over the picture stories and gave instructions. All subjects were asked to tell the stories formed by the pictures to the second investigator. The second investigator was presented as not knowing the content of the pictures. The subjects were explicitly instructed to tell a story, instead of just describing the pictures. They were asked not to bother about grammatical correctness and were instructed to ask unknown French words to the second investigator. The stories were recorded on a cassette recorder and transcribed by the two investigators.

3. Results

The transcription of the stories resulted in a data set of 42.000 words. In what follows, only the responses to the triggers are given, that is, it was checked which type of utterance was produced when the subject tried to describe the part of the story containing a trigger for reintroduction, selection from a set, or contrast. Only the first utterance related to such a trigger was counted.

The stories with a trigger for reintroduction triggered few specific topic marking constructions and many sentences with 'normal' subjects. They triggered no dislocations in L1 Dutch, one case of left dislocation in L2 French, and no dislocation and one (*il*) *y a*-cleft in L1 French, as is shown in Table 1.

The stories with a trigger for selection from a set triggered more specific topic marking constructions. In L1 Dutch 15% (5/33) left dislocations occurred, in L2 French 10% (3/30) left dislocations, and in L1 French 22% (2/9) left dislocations. In L1 Dutch, 6% (2/33) of the cases contained a subject with two finite verbs and 9% (3/33) cases with a left-dislocated subject with double Vf. These are also topic marking constructions. In L2 French 3% (1/30) (*il*) *y a*-clefts occurred and in L1 French 33% (3/9) cleft sentences were used, as is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Reintroduction

	L1 Dutch	L2 French	L1 French
nominal subject V [+FIN]	4 (36%)	8 (73%)	2 (67%)
V [+FIN] nominal subject	7 (64%)		
nominal subject V [-FIN]		1 (9%)	
nominal direct object		1 (9%)	
left dislocation of nominal subject (il) y a-cleft		1 (9%)	1 (33%)
total	11 (100%)	11 (100%)	3 (100%)

Table 2. Selection from a set

	L1 Dutch	L2 French	L1 French
nominal subject V [+FIN]	11 (33%)	16 (52%)	3 (33%)
V [+FIN] nominal subject	12 (36%)		
nominal subject V [-FIN]		3 (10%)	
nominal subject with double V [+FIN]	2 (6%)		
left dislocation of nominal subject	5 (15%)	3 (10%)	2 (22%)
left dislocation of nominal subject <i>and</i> double V [+FIN]	3 (9%)		
nominal direct object		8 (26%)	
nominal prepositional object			1 (11%)
(il) y a-cleft		1 (3%)	2 (22%)
c'est-cleft			1 (11%)
total	33 (100%)	31 (100%)	9 (100%)

Examples of the use of dislocation with selection from a set are given in (11–13), the use of the double Vf construction is exemplified in (14) and the double Vf construction *and* left dislocation in (15):

- (11) en de vogel die schrikt (6.3) (L1 Dutch)
and the bird that-one is-scared
'and the bird it is scared.'
- (12) et le le le première poisson il ehm il il fait des des des
and the the the first fish he ehm he he does of-the of-the of-the
trucs dans le dans le mer (6.1) (L2 French)
things in the in the sea
'and the the the first fish it ehm it it is doing things in the in the sea.'

- (13) bref. l' oiseau bleu, même si c'était lui qui voulait pas bouger,
 short the bird blue even if it was him that wanted not move
 il a peur (f.1) (L1 French)
 he has fear
 'OK. the blue bird, even though HE did not want to move, he's afraid.'
- (14) dan ee vliegt één van de vogels vliegt op (s.6.3) (L1 Dutch)
 then ee flies one of the birds flies up
 'then ee one of the birds flies up.'
- (15) en dan gaat één ee vogeltje het rooie vogeltje die gaat ee
 and then goes one ee bird the red bird that-one goes
 omgekeerd zitten [...] (6.9) (L1 Dutch)
 upside-down sit
 'and then one bird it turns upside down.'

The stories with a trigger for contrast triggered specific topic marking constructions as well. In L1 Dutch 16% (16/77) left dislocations were used, in L2 French 10% (6/60) left dislocations, and in L1 French 17% (3/18) left dislocations. Other topic marking constructions in L1 Dutch were 4% (3/77) double Vf constructions and 1% (1/77) left dislocations with double Vf, and in L1 French 27% (4/17) (*il y a*-clefts, as is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Contrast

	L1 Dutch	L2 French	L1 French
nominal subject V [+FIN.]	50 (65%)	46 (77%)	10 (56%)
V [+FIN.] nominal subject	3 (4%)		
nominal subject V [-FIN.]		4 (7%)	
nominal subject with empty V	4 (5%)	1 (2%)	
pronominal clitic subject V [+FIN.]		3 (5%)	
nominal subject with double V [+FIN.]	3 (4%)		
left dislocation of nominal subject	16 (21%)	6 (10%)	3 (17%)
left dislocation of nominal subject and double V [+FIN.]	1 (1%)		
(<i>il y a</i> -cleft			4 (27%)
total	77 (100%)	60 (100%)	17 (100%)

Examples of the use of dislocations with contrast are given in (16–18):

- (16) dus de moedervis die werd groen, en de baby vis
 so the mother-fish that-one became green and the baby fish
 die werd rood. (6.7) (L1 Dutch)
 that-one became red
 'so the mother fish it became red, and the baby fish it became green'

- (17) le pou- le poule orange il ee il croit [...] et le ... ee le poule noire
ee ee ee il devient ee petit (5.4) (L2 French)
the chi- the chicken orange he ee he grows and the ee the chicken black
ee ee ee he becomes ee small
'the orange chicken it ee it is growing [...] and the ... ee the black chicken ee ee
ee it is becoming ee small'
- (18) et puis ee finalement, celle qui a mangé le verre de terre, elle a
and then ee finally the-one who has eaten the worm of earth she has
mangé un ver de terre magique, et elle devient très grosse. et l'autre,
eaten a worm of earth magic and she becomes very big and the other
la petite poule qui était dans le dans l'arbre, elle a mangé une une
the little chicken that was in the in the tree she has eaten a a
cerise empoisonnée et elle devient tout petite. (f.2) (L1 French)
cherry poisoned and she becomes all small
'and then ee finally, the one that ate the worm, it ate a magic worm, and it be-
comes very big. and the other one, the little chicken that was in the tree, it ate a a
poisoned cherry and it becomes very small.'

The general picture for specific topic marking constructions is then as follows. Left dislocations were used as topic marking constructions in L1 Dutch, L2 French, and L1 French. No right dislocation was triggered by the test. Constructions with two Vfs were only used in L1 Dutch. Cleft sentences were frequently used in L1 French and only once in L2 French. Reintroduction triggered the fewest topic marking constructions. Selection from a set and contrast triggered most topic marking constructions in L1 Dutch, L2 French and L1 French. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Specific topic marking constructions in L1 Dutch, L2 French and L1 French

		L1 Dutch	L2 French	L1 French
reintroduction	left dislocation	–	1/11 (9%)	–
	2 Vf	–	–	–
	left disl. 2 Vf	–	–	–
	cleft	–	–	1/3 (33%)
selection from a set	left dislocation	5/33 (15%)	3/30 (10%)	2/9 (22%)
	2 Vf	3/33 (6%)	–	–
	left disl. 2 Vf	2/33 (9%)	–	–
	cleft	–	1/31 (3%)	3/9 (33%)
contrast	left dislocation	16/77 (21%)	6/60 (10%)	3/17 (17%)
	2 Vf	3/77 (4%)	–	–
	left disl. 2 Vf	1/77 (1%)	–	–
	cleft	–	–	4/17 (27%)

Table 5. Use of dislocations in L1 Dutch and L2 French on subject level

	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.6	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.7	6.8	6.9
dislocation in L1 Dutch	+	–	–	+	+	–	+	+	+	+	+
dislocation in L2 French	–	–	–	+	–	+	+	+	–	+	+

In order to find differences between learners in the use of dislocations in L1 Dutch and L2 French, the presence of dislocations on subject level was analyzed as is shown in Table 5. Seven learners use dislocations in the L1 and the L2 or do not use dislocations in either language. Three learners use dislocations in the L1, but not in the L2. One learner uses dislocations in the L2, but not in the L1.

In the control version of the test, which contained similar picture stories without the triggers, no topic marking constructions were used. Only pronominal and nominal subjects were used.

4. Discussion

Topic marking was expressed syntactically in L1 Dutch, L2 French, and L1 French, although partially with different constructions. Selection from a set and contrast turned out to be good triggers for topic marking syntax. Reintroduction triggered very few topic marking constructions, which may have resulted from the fact that the reintroduction stories contained only one trigger for reintroduction. The absence of topic marking constructions from the control test showed that the use of topic marking syntax was clearly related to the presence of the triggers. The fact that only left dislocation was used in L1 Dutch, L2 French and L1 French, and no right dislocation, may indicate that the pragmatic functions tested are typically expressed by left dislocation.

No L1 transfer of Dutch syntactic constructions took place. The L2 French syntax was acquired at a level at which no L1 Dutch V2 constructions were transferred anymore. In L2 French, learners used V3 sentences (XSVf) (19), and no L1 Dutch topicalization with V2 (XVfS) (20):

- (19) quand il veut faire une photo son ee caméra
 [when he wants make a photograph]_X [his ee camera]_S
 est cassé (6.1) (L2 French)
 [is]_{Vf} broken
 ‘when he wants to make a photograph his camera is broken’

- (20) *et quand il veut faire une photo est son caméra
 and [when he wants make a photograph]_X [is]_{Vf} [his camera]_S
 cassé (unattested)
 broken
 'and when he wants to make a photograph his camera is broken'

Thus, the subjects from this study have acquired the non V2 character of French, in contrast to younger Dutch pupils in a grammaticality judgement task on L2 French described in Hulk (1991). In the present study, subjects did not transfer the typically Dutch double Vf construction either, and typically French cleft sentences were nearly absent in L2 French. Only dislocations were used for L2 French topic marking. Hence, L2 French had the fewest topic marking structures.

Dislocation was the most generally used topic marking device, because it was the only topic marking construction that was present in L1 Dutch, L2 French, and L1 French. The use of dislocations in L2 French may have been caused both by L1 transfer and L2 input. Marking topics by dislocation may be the only way out for speakers of Dutch to mark topics in a L2 without topicalization (since they have acquired the non V2 character of French) and without clefts (which they do not know yet).

The number of dislocations in Dutch was about the same as found in previous research (Jansen 1981). In French, less dislocations and clefts and more canonical SVO orders were used than was expected on the basis of the literature (François 1974, Jean Jean 1981). This may have resulted from the formal situation and from the fact that the French subjects were all university students who have probably learned that dislocations and clefts are not acceptable in a formal style. More and different subjects will have to be tested in the future.

Interestingly, the personal style of topic marking (i.e. the use of dislocations) often seemed to be the same in the L1 and the L2. The analysis of the use of dislocations at subject level showed that three types of learners may be distinguished. The first type behaves alike in the L1 and the L2 and uses dislocations in both languages or in neither, and thus appears to use the same style in the L1 and the L2. The second type uses dislocations in L1 Dutch, but not in L2 French and may not have enough syntactic structure to use dislocations in the L2. The third type uses dislocations in the L2, but not in the L1, and is represented by a single subject using a syntactically rather complex style in Dutch. He may not be able to do this in French. The influence of personal style on topic marking in L2 learning is clearly a subject that deserves further investigation.

5. Conclusion

Topic marking functions were expressed syntactically in L1 Dutch, L2 French, and L1 French. No L1 Dutch V2 constructions and double Vf constructions were

transferred by the subjects investigated in this study. Typically French cleft sentences were practically absent from the L2 French data. Dislocations were present in L2 French, as in L1 Dutch and L1 French, which makes them the most generally used topic marking device. The personal style (the use of dislocations) was often alike in the L1 and the L2.

Notes

* I would like to thank Anne Karen Ruitenbergh and the pupils from the *Ignatius Gymnasium* in Amsterdam, the native speakers of French, the Dutch organization for Scientific Research for funding project nr. 360–70–011, and the members of the Interface Issues program (Petra Bos, Peter Coopmans, Ger de Haan, Bart Hollebrandse, Roeland van Hout, Aafke Hulk, Peter Jordens) and an anonymous *LIN* reviewer for comments, and Nelleke Strik for her assistance in the testing and the transcription of the result.

1. The two constructions are sometimes analyzed as structurally the same, with a topic moved to SpecCP. I follow the analysis going back to Frei (1929), according to which dislocated elements are outside the syntactic phrase.
2. Preposing of focused constituents with V3, as in *CA j'aime pas* 'THAT I don't like' is possible.

References

- François, D. (1974) *Français parlé. Analyse des unités phoniques et significatives d'un corpus recueilli dans la région parisienne*. Paris: S.E.L.A.F.
- Frei, H. (1929) *La grammaire des fautes*. Geneva: Slatkine reprints [1971].
- Hendriks, H. (2000) 'The acquisition of topic marking in L1 Chinese and L1 and L2 French.' *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 22, 369–397.
- Hulk, A. (1991) 'Parameter setting and the acquisition of word order in L2 French.' *Second Language Research* 7, 1–34.
- Jansen, F. (1981) *Syntaktische constructies in gesproken taal*. Amsterdam: Huis aan de Drie Grachten.
- Jean Jean (1981) 'L'organisation des formes sujets en français de conversation: Étude quantitative et grammaticale de deux corpus.' in *Recherches sur le français parlé* 3, 1981. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence.
- Lambrecht, K. (1984). 'A pragmatic constraint on lexical subjects in spoken French.' *Papers from the Chicago Linguistic Society* 20, 239–56.
- Lambrecht, K. (1994) *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, focus and the mental representations of discourse referents*. Cambridge: C.U.P.