

A negative concord puzzle tied to French exceptives

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1 Introduction

Elaborating on ideas put forth in Baciú (1978), a number of researchers such as O'Neill (2011), Homer (2015) and Authier (2018) have converged on the idea that French (*ne*) ... *que* exceptives like (1) are hidden quantificational comparatives that contain phonologically unrealized material. This material (capitalized in (1)) consists of a silent n-word *rien* 'nothing' and, as argued in Authier (2018), a silent *de plus* 'more'.

- (1) Elle (n') aime RIEN DE PLUS que les perles.
she NEG likes nothing of more than the pearls
'She only likes pearls.'

The evidence in favor of assuming the presence of the silent n-word *RIEN* 'nothing' is quite robust. Besides the fact that it can appear overtly in many varieties of French, including colloquial standard French, Homer (2015) observes that when an exceptive and an n-word are clause-mates, as in (2), they give rise to either a negative concord (NC) reading or a double negation (DN) reading.¹ This suggests that (*ne*)...*que* exceptives do indeed contain a covert n-word.²

¹As has been noted (cf. Corblin (1996: 251), stress on the first (or the second) n-word seems necessary to bring out the double-negative reading.

²Additional evidence comes from the fact that an exceptive adverb like *seulement* 'only', not being an n-word, does not trigger negative concord readings. Thus, (i) contrasts with (2) in that only (2) allows NC.

- (i) Personne ne porte seulement du bleu.
DN reading only: Everybody wears something besides blue.

- (2) Personne (ne) porte que du bleu.
 NC reading: Nobody wears anything but blue.
 DN reading: Everybody wears something besides blue.

As for the silent DE PLUS component, it too can appear overtly as long as overt rien is used as well. This is illustrated in (3a)-(3b).

- (3) a. On (n') a vu **rien de plus** que quelques phoques.
 we NEG have seen nothing of more than a-few seals
 'We only saw a few seals.'
 b. *On (n') a vu **RIEN de plus** que quelques phoques.

Thus, a reasonable hypothesis seems to be that (4a) is the maximal phonological realization of a quantificational comparative which can also be spelled out as the partial realization in (4b) and the minimal realization in (4c). That is, (4a)-(4c) are syntactically and semantically equivalent and differ only in terms of those features that are accessed by the phonological component.

- (4) a. Je (n') ai acheté rien de plus que des tomates.
 I NEG have bought nothing of more than some tomatoes
 'I only bought tomatoes.'
 b. Je (n')ai acheté rien DE PLUS que des tomates.
 c. Je (n')ai acheté RIEN DE PLUS que des tomates.

This hypothesis immediately raises the question of whether the silent elements represented in capital letters in (4b) and (4c) come to be silent in the same way as lexical elements whose phonetic matrix is deleted at Spell-Out, instantiating the phenomenon known as ellipsis (see e.g. Merchant 2001, 2004). To answer this question, let us take as a point of departure the feature-based taxonomy of lexical items given in Her & Tsai (2015). This taxonomy assumes that canonical lexical items have formal features (FF), which are accessible in the course of the narrow-syntactic derivation, as well as phonological features (PFF) and semantic features (LFF). While all lexical items active in syntax must have FF, non-canonical lexical items may lack PFF, LFF, or both. For example, overt expletives have no LFF, base-generated silent elements like PRO and pro have no PFF and null expletives have neither PFF nor LFF. Further, lexical items with no PFF, which we will simply call silent elements (SEs), differ from elements whose silence is due to ellipsis in that while the former have no PFF to begin with, the latter enter the derivation with PFF (i.e. enter the derivation as canonical lex-

ical items) but their PFF are made invisible by ellipsis at the syntax-phonology interface (so-called PF deletion). A second important difference between SEs and elided elements has to do with the way in which they are subject to recoverability. That is, the meaning of SEs is recoverable from their pronounced counterparts, which means that SEs do not require overt antecedents. PF-deleted elements, on the other hand, are recoverable through overt discourse antecedents. Given this taxonomy, the silent components in (4a)-(4c) must be seen as SEs rather than elided elements given that they are interpreted not via a discourse antecedent but, rather, by accessing the meaning of their PFF-endowed counterparts in the lexicon. Keeping these characteristics in mind, I will devote the remainder of this squib to the issue of availability of partial and minimal exceptive ne...que realizations under prepositions. As I will show, while their syntactic derivation is consistent with the hypotheses formulated above, their semantic behavior as regards the availability of negative concord constitutes an unexpected puzzle which I will carefully lay out but for which I will offer but speculative remarks.

2 Deriving prepositional exceptives

Based on paradigms like (5), it has been widely assumed in the literature (see e.g. Gross 1977: 90) that exceptive *que* can never follow a preposition.

- (5) Je (ne) compte **que sur/*sur que** son intégrité.
 I NEG count than on/*on than his integrity
 'I count only on his integrity.'

However, some have noted (e.g. Damourette & Pichon 1943: 220 and Gaatone 1999: 105) that this characterization does not always hold in colloquial registers, as (6) illustrates.

- (6) a. Faites trois séances si vous voulez, moi je ne viendrai **à que**
 do three sessions if you wish me I NEG will-come to than
 deux.
 two
 'Organize three sessions if you wish; me, I'll come to only two of
 them.'
 (M. ABA, July 2, 1919, recorded in Damourette & Pichon 1943: 220)

- b. [...] des ministres **avec que** des vraies factures [...]

some ministers with than some genuine bills

‘[...] ministers with only genuine bills’

(TF1, May 13, 1991, recorded in Gaatone 1999: 105)

On closer inspection, the full prepositional exceptive paradigm turns out to be comprised of three distinct cases. First, there are instances, illustrated in (7), in which the *que* in minimal realizations not only may but must follow the preposition regardless of register. These typically involve PPs complement to N and do not allow (optional) *ne*.

- (7) a. Ils ont un menu **avec que** des produits bio.

they have a menu with than some products organic

‘They have a menu with only organic products.’

b. *Ils ont un menu **qu’avec** des produits bio.

Under the view adopted here, the maximal realization for a sentence like (7a) is as in (8).

- (8) Ils ont un menu **avec rien de plus que** des produits bio.

The minimal realization and the partial realization of (8) are then obtained by using the silent counterparts to the overt elements in bold, yielding (9a)-(9b). Further, given the source in (8), there is no way to derive the ungrammatical (9c), in which *que* precedes the preposition.

- (9) a. Ils ont un menu avec RIEN DE PLUS **que** des produits bio.

b. Ils ont un menu avec rien DE PLUS **que** des produits bio.

c. *Ils ont un menu **qu’avec** des produits bio.

Next, there are maximal realizations, such as the one in (10), in which the preposition introducing the phrase that is the object of the comparison must be repeated.

- (10) Ils (ne) causent de rien **de plus que** *(**de**) politique. they NEG talk of nothing of more than *(of) politics ‘They only talk about politics.’

Both the partial and minimal realizations of such sentences involve the overt realization of at least one of the two instances of the preposition. The first instance of the preposition can only be overt if *rien* is overt. Further, if only one instance of the preposition is overt, it must be the second one. This correctly rules in (11a)-

(11c), and rules out (11d)-(11f).

- (11) a. Ils (ne) causent de rien DE PLUS que de politique.
b. Ils (ne) causent de RIEN DE PLUS que de politique.
c. Ils (ne) causent de rien DE PLUS que de politique.
d. *Ils (ne) causent de RIEN DE PLUS que de politique.
e. *Ils (ne) causent de rien DE PLUS que de politique.
f. *Ils (ne) causent de RIEN DE PLUS que de politique.

We are, however, left with the following questions, for which I have no answers at this time: (a) why is the overtness/presence of the first instance of the preposition contingent upon *rien* being overt; (b) why must it be the second instance of the preposition that is overt when only one instance of the preposition is overt / present; (c) is the first instance of the preposition, crossed out in the representations in (11a)-(11b), simply omitted or is it syntactically present but phonologically silent and why?

The third and final set of facts consists of maximal realizations like (12a)-(12b), which feature one or two instances of the preposition being used.

- (12) a. Je (n') ai cuisiné **avec** rien de plus qu'**avec** des
I NEG have cooked with nothing of more than-with some
produits frais.
ingredients fresh
'I cooked with only fresh ingredients.'
b. Je (n') ai cuisiné **avec** rien de plus que des produits frais.

We thus have two possible sources for partial and minimal realizations. Stemming from the source in (12a), which contains only one instance of the preposition, are the partial and minimal realizations in (13), both of which are attested.

- (13) a. Je (n') ai cuisiné avec rien DE PLUS que des produits frais.
b. Je (n') ai cuisiné avec RIEN DE PLUS que des produits frais.

The source in (12b), which contains two instances of the preposition, additionally allows us to generate the partial and minimal realizations in (14a)-(14d), which are attested as well. Note, however, that, based on the data in (14), one must again assume, as we did for (11), that the first instance of the preposition can only be overt if *rien* is overt, i.e., not a SE (or a trace – cf. (14d) which differs from the partial realization in (14b) only in that *rien* appears in pre-participial position, a case of so-called quantification at a distance). Further, if only one instance of

the preposition is overt, it must be the second one.

- (14) a. ??Je (n')ai cuisiné avec rien DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
b. Je (n')ai cuisiné avec rien DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
c. Je (n')ai cuisiné avec RIEN DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
d. Je (n')ai rien_i cuisiné avec t_i DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
e. *Je (n')ai cuisiné avec RIEN DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.

In sum, despite some needed stipulations concerning which instances of the preposition may or may not be overt, our general assumptions concerning the nature of the full realization of both partial and minimal realizations allow us to generate all of the attested syntactic realizations of these constructions. In what follows, however, I will show that things are not as straightforward at the syntax-semantics interface. Specifically, I will demonstrate that some partial and minimal realizations unexpectedly exhibit a behavior that diverge from that of their full realizations when it comes to the availability of negative concord readings.

3 A negative concord puzzle

As is well-known, in French, when two n-words are clause-mates (cf. Déprez 1999 among many others), they may (but need not) give rise to a NC reading. Thus, a sentence like (15a), which contains the two n-words *jamais* 'never' and *personne* 'nobody', is ambiguous between a NC (single negation) reading (15b) and a DN (double negation) reading (15c).

- (15) a. Il n'y a **jamais personne** sur cette plage.
 there is never nobody on this beach
b. There never is anybody on this beach. (NC interpretation)
c. There is always somebody on this beach. (DN interpretation)

The fact that the two maximal realizations in (16a)-(16b), which contain the two n-words *jamais* 'never' and *rien* 'nothing', are reported by a majority of speakers to be similarly ambiguous between (16c) and (16d) immediately suggests that the two n-words are clause-mates.

- (16) a. Je (n') ai jamais cuisiné avec rien de plus qu'avec des
 I NEG have never cooked with nothing of more than-with some
 produits frais.
 ingredients fresh

- b. Je (n')ai jamais cuisiné **avec** rien de plus que des produits frais.
- c. I've never cooked with anything more than fresh ingredients. (NC reading)
- d. I've always cooked with something more than fresh ingredients. (DN reading)

This being the case, we then expect that adding the n-word *jamais* to the five partial and minimal realizations in (13) and (14), as in (17) and (18), should yield a similar ambiguity between a NC and a DN reading. This follows from our assumptions that (a) partial and minimal realizations are syntactically indistinguishable from their maximal realization sources and (b) the SEs they contain are semantically recoverable by accessing the meaning of their PFF-endowed counterparts found in their maximal realizations. This prediction, however, turns out to be incorrect. Although there is some variation in native speakers' judgments, the great majority of my informants agreed on the following interpretations.

- (17) a. Je (n')ai jamais cuisiné avec rien DE PLUS que des produits frais.
Unambiguous: DN reading only
- b. Je (n')ai jamais cuisiné avec RIEN DE PLUS que des produits frais.
Unambiguous: DN reading only
- (18) a. Je (n')ai jamais cuisiné avec rien DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
Ambiguous: NC and DN readings possible (DN reading preferred)
- b. Je (n')ai jamais cuisiné avec RIEN DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
Ambiguous: NC and DN readings possible (NC reading preferred)
- c. Je (n')ai jamais rien_i cuisiné avec t_i DE PLUS qu'avec des produits frais.
Ambiguous: NC and DN readings possible (NC reading preferred)

While the interpretations tied to the partial and minimal realizations in (18) linked to the maximal realization source in (16a) do conform to our predictions, those in (17), which stem from the maximal realization in (16b) do not. Specifically, while (16b) allows NC, its purported partial (17a) and minimal (12b) realizations do not. Descriptively, the presence of one or more SEs preceded by an overt instance of the preposition somehow blocks NC. Explaining why this is so is not immediately obvious. It seems clear, however, that what contributes to the unavailability of NC in (17) is the combination of two factors; namely the use of SEs and the fact that the quantificational comparative is c-commanded by a phonologically overt preposition.

Regarding the first factor, one could conjecture that in particular syntactic configurations, the use of phonologically unrealized material blocks NC readings. This is not an implausible assumption, given that a case can be made for ellipsis having such a blocking effect on NC. To explain, Merchant (2004) has argued, based on a range of connectivity effects, that fragment answers are derived from full sentential structures, subject to ellipsis. If this is correct, then (19) should be assumed to have the representation in (19), where the crossed-out material represents syntactically present material that has undergone PF-deletion.

- (19) A: Qui n'a jamais pleuré? 'Who's never cried?'
 B: Personne. 'Nobody.'
 C: Personne n'a jamais pleuré.
 D: Personne n'a jamais pleuré.

As pointed out in Corblin (1996: 251), while a non-elliptical answer like (19) is ambiguous between a NC and a DN reading, its corresponding fragment/elliptical answer in (19)/(19) cannot have a NC reading but must be interpreted in a bi-negative fashion (i.e., as meaning "Everybody has cried."). Thus, fragment answer ellipsis is one environment in which the presence of phonologically silent material negatively affects the availability of NC.

In the case under consideration in (17), however, saying that the presence of SEs blocks NC is insufficient since failure to license NC only occurs if the SE in question is c-commanded by an overt preposition (or, more simply, a preposition, if we assume that the crossed-out prepositions in cuisine⁶ are not syntactically represented). This has the flavor of a locality condition but, unfortunately, locality conditions on NC are poorly understood and have yet to be spelled out beyond the widespread observation that NC appears to be clause bound. Indeed, while it seems accurate to assume that French n-words that are not clause-mates fail to yield NC readings, it can be shown that n-words that are clause-mates do not always participate in NC. For example, n-words complement to the preposition *pour* 'for' participate in NC with other clause-mate n-words when *pour* is taken to mean 'in favor of' (20a) or introduces the stimulus of a psych predicate (20b), but do not participate in NC when *pour* expresses a reason (20c).

- (20) a. Personne ne s'est prononcé pour rien. (ambiguous)
 Nobody claimed to be in favor of anything. (NC)
 Everybody claimed to be in favor of something. (DN)
 b. Personne ne s'est inquiété pour rien. (ambiguous)

- Nobody worried about anything. (NC)
 Everybody worried about something. (DN)
- c. *Personne n'a été puni pour rien.* (unambiguous)
 Nobody got punished for anything. (NC)
 Everybody got punished for something. (DN)

These facts, which, to the best of my knowledge, have never been discussed in the literature, would force proponents of the clause-bound characterization of the locality conditions on NC to attribute a clausal structure to the complement of *pour* in (20c), but not in (20a)-(20b), a dubious move at best. A possibly more straightforward interpretation of (20) is that the set of interpretative options normally available to an n-word complement to a preposition can be reduced by the sort of thematic role that preposition assigns to it.

The thematic properties of prepositions have also been shown by Authier (2016) to play a role in the licensing of the SE *pro* in the context of orphan prepositions. For example, as shown in (21), the preposition *dedans* 'in' can license a *pro* with definite interpretation if it takes a complement that denotes a material entity with well-defined boundaries (e.g., a package – cf. (21a)) but not if it takes a complement that denotes a spatial entity with ill-defined or unknown boundaries (e.g., the streets of Montmartre – cf. (21b)).

- (21) a. *Ce colis, il y a un cadeau dedans pro.*
 this package there is a present in (it)
- b. **Les rues de Montmartre, elle vend des crêpes dedans pro.*
 the streets of Montmartre she sells crepes in (them)

Returning to the interpretive contrast between the full realization of the prepositional exceptive in (16b) and its partial and minimal realizations in (17), we can now reinterpret the facts in a similar light. That is, while the preposition *avec* 'with' licenses both the overt and SE versions of the exceptive, the latter are more restricted in their interpretation or, to put it slightly differently, although SEs are recoverable from their pronounced counterparts, they display a more restricted set of interpretations when they are complement to a preposition. This is, of course, rather speculative, but it does suggest that there might be a link between the semantic properties of SEs and the selectional restrictions of the prepositions that license them. I will leave this as an open question for future research.

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