

Workshop in honour of Hans Obenauer, 20 Oct 2023, UPS Pouchet, Paris

On French *Que, Quoi, Ce que* and clefts.

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My presentation will try to solve an (apparent) contradiction between the claim made in recent generative work that French interrogative *que* is a clitic, on the one hand, and the fact that *que* occurs perfectly felicitously in extremely frequent questions like *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* and *Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit?*. The inputs of such questions involve either sentences of the type *C'est quoi?* or colloquial clefts such as *C'est quoi qu'il a vu?* Both ban *que* and other clitics in their respective focus positions: **C'est que/le?* vs. *C'est quoi/lui*, **C'est que/le qu'il a vu?* vs. *C'est quoi/lui qu'il a vu?* So, everything else being equal, one would expect *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* and *Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit?* to be severely deviant too.

Cecilia's and my recent analyses of *Qu'est-ce que* questions provide one half of the solution to the conundrum: What follows *Qu'est* in such questions is a free relative and *Qu'est* is a question about the entity denoted by the free relative in which *que* never occupies a focus position.

The second half of the solution relies on the idea that in the constructions at hand lexical *quoi* is merged in, or moved to, the focus positions of the relevant constructions before being deleted, along lines already suggested in Obenauer (1976).

If this is correct one unexpected property of French headless relatives obtains: despite the massive syntactic difference between *what* and *ce que* in say, *What you feared has come to pass* and *Ce que tu craignais s'est produit*, French free relatives would seem to have the null counterpart of *What – QUOI*— licensed by *ce* in their syntactic structures before spell-out.

References.

Obenauer Hans-Gearg (1976), *Etudes de syntaxe interrogative du français, Quoi, combien et le complementeur*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1976.

Cecilia Poletto & J-Y Pollock (2021) "Remnant movement and Smuggling in some Romance interrogative clauses" in *Smuggling in Syntax* (A. Belletti & C. Collins (eds), *Oxford Studies in Comparative Syntax*, 2021, p. 255-317.

Jean-Yves Pollock (2021) "On the syntax of *Qu'est-ce que* Clauses and related constructions", *Probus* (2021; 33(1): 95-149.

Jean-Yves Pollock (2022) "On free relatives and related constructions in French" in Cecilia Poletto's *Festschrift for her 60th birthday* (*Quaderni di lavoro ASIt n. 24* (2022): 371-405 ISSN: 1828-2326). Will also appear as chapter 7 in my forthcoming *Studies on Interrogative and relative syntax in French and Romance*, Oxford University Press.