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

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1. The riddle.

- (1) a. Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit?
b. Qu'est-ce que c'est ?
- (2) a. *C'est pourquoi qu'il est parti?
b. ??C'est comment qu'il a payé?
- (3) a. *Pourquoi est-ce que c'est qu'il est parti?
b. ??Comment est-ce que c'est qu'il a payé?
- (4) a. Qu'est-ce que c'était (qu'il a dit)?
b. * Qu'était-ce que c'était (qu'il a dit)?
- (5) a. C'est *que vs. quoi qu'il a dit ?
b. C'est *que vs. quoi?
c. *Quoi est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit ?
d. *Quoi est-ce que c'est ?

Fact 1: (1a) is a cleft (cf. Obenauer (1981)). Clitic *que*, unlike *quoi*, cannot stand in the focus position of (5a) or (5b). We would therefore expect (1a, b) to be as bad as (5a, b). Yet they're perfect, unlike the expected but unacceptable (5c, d). Why is that so?

2. On *Qu'est-ce que* questions (Poletto & Pollock (2021), Pollock (2021), (2022))

- (6) *Ce que tu as fait* est surprenant
- (7) *Qu'est-ce que tu as fait ?*
- (8) *Ce que tu as fait* c'est quoi?
- (9) *Cusa t'è fai cusè?*

Claim 1: *Ce que tu as fait* in (7), despite the misleading spelling *est-ce*, is the same free relatives as in (6). In such constructions *ce* is merged to the left of the raised null antecedent to license/identify it (Pollock (2023)), as sketched in (10a):

- (10) a. [**est** [_{SC} [**ce** CHOSE_i [**que** [**tu as fait** t_i]]] **que**]
b. [**Que**_j [**est** [_{SC} [**ce** CHOSE_i [**que** [**tu as fait** t_i]]] t_j]
c. [_{EP} **Que**_j [_{SC} [**ce** CHOSE_i [**que** [**tu as fait** t_i]]] t_j]

In that structure the free relative is the subject of a small clause embedded under *est* whose predicate is the interrogative clitic *que*. As a clitic *que* adjoins/cliticises to *est* as in (10b)

Claim 2: *Est* in such questions, despite its spelling, is the tense-less root of the copula ϵ (cf. (4b)), so (10c) is (the last but one step in) the derivation of (7) (cf. Pollock (2021), (2022), (2023)).

Claim 3 : *Qui est-ce que tu as vu?*, *Où est-ce que tu pars?*, *Quand est-ce que tu vas à Paris?* may be analysed along the same lines:

- (11) a. [Qui_j [ε [ce QUI_i [que [tu as vu t_i]]]]] t_j]
 b. [Où_j [ε [ce OU_i [que [tu pars t_i]]]]] t_j]
 c. [Quand_j [ε [ce OU_i [que [tu pars t_i]]]]] t_j]

Claim 4: in (11) the interrogative predicates *qui*, *où* and *quand* delete –i.e. permit the non lexicalisation of– their relative counterparts in the headless relative. In that perspective *ce* is merged for identifying QUI, OU and QUAND and (11a, b, c) can again be seen in the same light as sentences like *Qui tu as vu, c'est qui?*, *Où tu vas, c'est où?*, *Quand tu pars, c'est quand?* etc.

⇒ The analysis of the clitic vs. non clitic contrast between *que* vs. *qui*, *où*, *quand*, *combien* etc. in the pair (12a) vs. (12b), parallel to (12c) vs. (12d), shows (10)-(11) should be enriched.

- (12) a. *Que, à ton avis, est-ce qu'elle veut?
 b. Où, à ton avis, est-ce qu'elle a vu cela ?
 c. *Que, à ton avis, veut-elle?
 d. Où, à ton avis, a-t-elle vu cela?
 e. Qu'est-ce qu'elle veut?
 f. Que veut-elle? 'What wants she?' What does she want?

⇒ Parentheticals like *à ton avis* in such examples are merged in the high left periphery, as claimed in Munaro & Obenauer (2002). (12b) and (12d) show that non clitic *où*, (also *quand*, *pourquoi*, *comment* etc.), cross over *à ton avis* on their way to the interrogative slot further up in the HLP. (12a, c) show that clitic *que* cannot 'skip' such parentheticals, In that respect *que* is like pronominal clitics: **Il, à mon avis, est malin* vs. *Lui, à mon avis, est malin*.

⇒ This is because as a clitic it must first adjoin to *veut* in (12f) or to ε in (12e) then move as a head to IntP, which is only possible if no blocking element intervenes between it and its final target as illustrated by (13a), minimally contrasting with (13b) –Cf. Poletto & Pollock (2004):

- (13) a. [_{IntP} Que_j (*à ton avis) [_{εP} t_j ε [[_{CP} ce t_i que [_{IP} elle veut t_i]]]]] t_j]
 b. [_{IntP} Où_j (à ton avis) [_{εP} ε [t_i [_{CP} ce OU_i que [_{IP} elle a vu cela t_i]]]]] t_j]

⇒ Questions such as (14) share the tense-less root ε with (10)-(11), but cannot be analysed as (10)-(11) are: neither *ce qu'il a lu/voté* nor *ce que tu as parlé* are semantically appropriate free relatives. *Quel livre, à quel linguiste, contre qui* are clearly arguments of *lu, parlé, voté*.

- (14) a. Quel livre est-ce qu'il a lu?
 b. A quel linguiste est-ce que tu as parlé ?
 c. Contre qui est-ce qu'il a voté?

Claim 5. (14) are to be paired with the questions in (15) and derived as shown in (16):

- (15) a. Quel livre qu'il a lu?
 b. A quel linguiste qu't'as parlé ?
 c. Contre qui qu'il a voté?

- (16) a. [_{IntP} [Quel livre]_i [ε [ce t_i que [_{IP} il a lu t_i]]]]
 b. [_{IntP} [A quel linguiste]_i [ε [ce t_i que [_{IP} t'as parlé t_i]]]]
 c. [_{IntP} [Contre quel politicien]_i [ε [ce t_i que [_{IP} il a voté t_i]]]]

- ⇒ The complements of *lu*, *parlé* and *voté* first moves to the pre-*que* position of (15). At that stage the strings in (16) are identical to (15). ε is then merged and the DPs in the pre-*que* position move to IntP, triggering the merger of *ce* for licensing their ‘ghosts’ –traces– which yields the final parses in (16).
 ⇒ Such derivations can also be adopted for *Qui est-ce que tu as vu?*, *Où est-ce que tu pars?* *Quand est-ce que tu vas à Paris?* *Qui/où/quand est-ce que* questions can thus be paired with two parses, unlike those in (14) which only have the ones in (16).
 ⇒ In the general perspective of Chomsky’s (2021, 16) Strong Minimalist Program, I’ll assume that “*computational efficiency*”, in particular something like “*do as little as possible*” weeds out the structures in (11) and the derivation in (13b), hence that the correct parses for such sentences are the more economical ones in (17):

- (17) a. [_{IntP} **Qui**_i [_{εP} ε [ce t_i [que [tu as vu t_i]]]]]]
 b. [_{IntP} **Où**_i [_{εP} ε [ce t_i [que [tu pars t_i]]]]]]
 c. [_{IntP} **Quand**_i [_{εP} ε [ce t_i [que [tu vas à Paris t_i]]]]]]

- ⇒ Why must *ce* be merged in (16) and (17)? In other cases of successive cyclic movement such merger would yield sharply unacceptable sentences, as (18) illustrates.

- (18) a. [**Qui**_i [**crois-tu** (*ce) [t_i [que [_{TP} Marie a vu t_i]]]]]]
 b. [**Où**_i [**crois-tu** (*ce) [t_i [que [_{TP} Marie est t_i]]]]]]
 c. [**Où**_i [**crois-tu** (*ce) [t_i [**PRO être** t_i]]]]]]

Claim 6: ε is incapable of licensing the traces in (17) unlike tensed and infinitival *être* and the matrix predicates in (18). Merger of *ce* in (16)-(17) is required by the language particular use of ε in *Qu’est-ce que* questions. Using demonstrative *ce* for that purpose in that very specific French configuration however takes advantage of a general property of demonstratives at work in headless relatives in a number of languages and dialects, including (literary) English in sentences like *That which you feared has come to pass* and French subordinate sentences like *Pierre se moque de ce que ses étudiants ne l’aiment pas* or *Je tiens à ce que tu partes* (Cf. Wiltschko (1998), Pollock (2023)).

3. On the pre-*que* position.

Fact 2: Along with *qui*, *où*, *quand*, *comment*, *pourquoi* in (19a...e) colloquial French also allows for bare *quoi* to stand in the pre-*que* position of (15), as illustrated in (19f...l):¹

¹ (19f, g, h) are quoted in Lefevre (2006, p. 91, 99, 121). (19f, g, h) are from Vincenot’s *Le pape des escargots*. The other examples are from Maurice Genevois’s *Nuit de Guerre*, the second chapter of his *Ceux de 14* (Omnibus edition, Villeneuve-d’Ascq, 2012). Example (19i) is from page 299, (19j, k) from page 311, and (19l) from page 285. Maurice Genevois’s *Ceux de 14* is an eye-witness account of the early months of the First World War, known for the remarkable vividness and accuracy of its description of life in the trenches. These examples thus certainly record Genevois’s soldiers’ speech 110 years ago very faithfully and they still strike me as fine in that colloquial register of French. Similar examples can be found in the other chapters of *Ceux de 14*. Such questions are frequent in the Romance domain, in particular in the NIDs and in colloquial Italian.

- (19) a. Qui qu't'as vu aujourd'hui?
 b. Où qu'e'va ?
 c. Quand qu'tu pars ?
 d. Comment qu'tu vas?
 e. Pourquoi qu'elle est partie?
 f. Quoi donc qu'elle avait?
 g. Quoi donc qui t'arrive?
 h. Quoi qu'il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
 i. Quoi qu'on fout tout l'long du jour ?
 j. Quoi qu'c'est?
 k. Quoi qu'on y peut ?
 l. Quoi qu'tu m'regardes?

Fact 3. Such examples contrast with the unacceptable (20):²

- (20) a. *Quoi est-ce qu'il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
 b. *Quoi est-ce que c'est ?
 c. *Quoi est-ce qu'on y peut ?
 d. *Quoi est-ce que tu me regardes ?

Claim 7. (20) should be seen in the same light as (21) in Standard French:³

- (21) a. *Quoi tu fais?
 b. *Quoi fais-tu?
 c. *Je ne sais pas quoi il fait

Only those *Qu*-words and phrases which can occur at the left edge of SCLI questions such as *Où est-il?* in standard French can also occur in the Interrogative layer of *Qu'est-ce que* questions. Bare *Quoi* in **standard** French surfaces at the right-edge of questions such as (22):

- (22) Tu fais quoi?

² Their absence in Genevois's book cannot prove that they were unacceptable 110 years ago but it at least suggests that Genevois didn't hear them.

³ Lefeuvre (2006, p. 50-51, 57) quotes examples *Quoi donc t'étonne ? Quoi donc m'opresse et me ravit à la fois, Quoi d'autre pourrait m'amener chez toi à cette heure ?* from Grevisse (1988), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Willy et Colette's *Claudine à Paris*. My claim is that such examples are derived from colloquial *Quoi donc qui t'étonne ? Quoi donc qui m'opresse et me ravit à la fois, Quoi d'autre qui pourrait ...* by *qui* deletion, which results in a more 'standard' style. Why adding *d'autre* (else) or *diable* (hell/devil) to bare *quoi* in such examples improves things for some speakers is not really understood. In my French the same addition in (20) or (21) does not, as shown in (i) and (ii):

- (i) a. *Quoi diable est-ce qu'il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
 b. *Quoi d'autre est-ce que c'est ?
 c. *Quoi diable est-ce qu'on y peut ?
- (ii) a. *Quoi diable est-ce que tu me regardes ?
 b. *Quoi diable tu fais?
 c. *Quoi d'autre fais-tu?
 d. *Je ne sais pas quoi diable il fait

Claim 8. (22) and the like are derived by leftward movement to the focus position of the French version of Belletti's (2005) low left periphery. In short bare *quoi* bears a [+focus] feature to be checked in the LLP. Subsequent remnant movement of vP to the LLP Top/GroundP slot yields the word order of (22) and its interrogative interpretation. *Quoi* here is **not in situ**, despite appearances, as argued in Poletto & Pollock (2021)).

Claim 9. The pre-*que* position in the HLP of colloquial examples like (19) is the counterpart in the HLP of Belletti's LLP focus layer: Both attract *qu*-phrases including *quoi* and check a focus feature. For bare *quoi* to be licit in (21) it would have to be able to share with *qui*, *où*, etc. the ability to move to the interrogative/relative layer of the HLP. It can't so neither (20) nor (21) are generated.

Fact 4. *Qui*, *où*, *quand* etc. also head free relatives in addition to their role in questions, as shown by examples (23) and (24):

- (23) a. Où tu iras?
 b. Quand tu partiras?
 c. Qui tu embrasseras?
 d. Combien ça coutera?
 e. Combien t'en mangeras?
 f. Comment tu vas?
- (24) a. J'irai où tu iras
 b. Je partirai quand tu partiras
 c. J'embrasserai qui tu embrasseras
 d. Ça coutera combien ça coutera
 e. J'en mangerai combien tu en mangeras
 f. Je ferai comment tu fais

Fact 5. The only two *qu*-words that cannot occur in (23), *quoi* and *que*, also fail to head free relatives in Standard French

- (25) a. (Je ne sais pas) *Que tu fais?
 b. (Je ne sais pas) *Quoi tu fais?
 c. *Je ferai que tu fais
 d. *Je ferai quoi tu fais

Fact 6. But *quoi+que* in colloquial questions does have a free relative counterpart.⁴

- (26) a. Je mangerai quoi qu'tu manges
 b. Je lirai quoi qu'tu lis
 c. Tout le monde pourrait dire quoi qu'il veut là-dessus

Standard French also has *quoi+que* in the free relative clause in (27), the counterparts of (one type of) *Wh-ever* relatives in English. Unlike (26) they belong to the 'elevated' register of French.

- (27) a. Quoi qu'on lise, on ne peut pas tout savoir
 'What that one read_{subjunctive} one can't know everything' = Whatever you read you ...

⁴ I heard (26c) on May 15th 2023 during the 8 AM news program of France Culture. It was uttered by a doctor who was being interviewed on the requirement that all doctors and nurses working in hospitals be vaccinated against the covid virus.

- b. Quoi qu'on fasse, one ne peut satisfaire tout le monde
 'What that one do_{subjunctive} one can't please everybody' = Whatever you do you ...

4. Solving the riddle.

(28) Qu'est-ce que c'est?

(29) C'est quoi?

(28) should be seen in the same light as (30) and (29) in that of (31):

(30) a. Qui est-ce que c'est?

b. Où est-ce que c'est ?

c. Quand est-ce que c'est?

(31) a. C'est qui?

b. C'est où?

c. C'est quand?

The derivations in (32) yield (30), but the very same in (33) for (28) should crash since it involves the two illicit steps in (34):

(32) a. [_{IntP} **Qui**_i [_{εP} ε [**ce** [_{FocP} t_i [**que** [_{TP} **ce est** t_i]]]]]]

b. [_{IntP} **Où**_i [_{εP} ε [**ce** [_{FocP} t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]]]]

c. [_{IntP} **Quand**_i [_{εP} ε [**ce** [_{FocP} t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]]]]

(33) [_{IntP} **Que**_i [_{εP} t_i ε [**ce** [_{FocP} t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]]]]

(34) a. *C'est que?

b. *Que que c'est?

The more complex derivation in (34c) –see section 2 above— does not:

(34) c. [_{IntP} **Que**_j [_{εP} t_j ε [**ce** [_{FocP} **CHOSE**_i [**que** [**ce est** t_i]]]]] t_j]

In (34c) *que* adjoins to εP and 'hops' to IntP so it never finds itself in a focus position. However non lexical **CHOSE** does.⁵ Since non lexical entities, clitics in general and *que* in particular cannot bear a focus feature, **CHOSE** cannot be merged in or move to the focus positions of the copular clause in (34a, b). Therefore (34c) cannot be the parse of (28) either.

The correct derivation for (28) involves (19j) –from Genevois's book–, as shown in (35):

(19j) Quoi qu'c'est?

(35) a. [[_{FocP} **quoi**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]]

b. [_{εP} ε [_{SC} [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]] **que**]

⁵ Unlike the null antecedent of relatives like *J'aime ce que tu fais*. The object position of *fais* is not an inherent focus position, as shown by questions like *Que fais-tu?* (what are you doing?) or simple affirmative sentences like *Il le fait*. Clitic *que*, just like clitic *le*, can be merged as the object of *fais* but neither can be merged in the post *est/était* position in **Ca l'est/était* vs. *C'est/était lui* **Ca ne l'est pas* vs. *Ca n'est pas lui*. *Il fait quoi?* is a fine standard question because *quoi* moves to the LLP focus position, à la Belletti. Lexical *quoi* can be merged in a non focus position provided it checks its focus feature at a later stage of the derivation, as in the colloquial examples in (19) or (26). On *quoi* moving from a focus position to a non focus position see 5 below.

- c. [_{εP} ε [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]] **que**]
- d. [_{IntP} **Que**_j [_{εP} t_j ε [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [**que** [**c'est** t_i]]] t_j]]

On the assumption that such sentences can also be headless relatives⁶ they qualify as the first step in the derivation in (35), where the post *est* position and the pre *que* positions are both focus positions filled by lexical *quoi*. Merging the small clause and its *que* predicate yields (35b). For this derivation to converge *que* must ‘void’ –i.e. suppress the lexicalisation of– *quoi*, which yields (35c) upon merging of *ce*. Non lexical QUOI is thus ‘licensed/identified’. Finally, movement of *que* to εP and IntP yields (35d) which obeys the constraints on elements in focus positions. So (35) is the only licit derivation for (28). The derivation of *Qui est-ce que c'est?* is simpler:

- (36) a. [_{FocP} **Qui**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]
- b. [_{IntP} **Qui**_i [_{εP} ε [**ce** [_{FocP} t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i]]]]]]]

Three important remarks must be made at this point:

- ⇒ Firstly, (35) and (36) take it for granted that the requirement that the pre-*que* Focus position should be filled by some [+focus] lexical *qu*-item need only be met derivationally. This is uncontroversially true of interrogative clefts in many languages, including English: in *Who was it that you were talking to?* it is the non lexical ghost (trace) of *who* that is sitting in the focus position of the cleft. In (35) *quoi* despite the fact that it is voided at a later stage can be reconstructed in that focus position too because *ce* licenses/identifies its ghost.
- ⇒ Secondly, the derivation in (35) has *que* deleting *quoi*. But deletion of that sort is universally held to be restricted to strictly identical lexical items, which *que* and *quoi* are not. Despite this, I argue that *que* and *quoi* are close enough to allow for deletion under identity of *quoi* by *que*. More particularly, they should be seen in the light of the Wh-doubling configurations of many Northern Italian Dialects. Consider for example (37) in Illasi (Verona):

- (37) S'alo fat che? ‘What has-he done what?’What did did he do?

- ⇒ In such configurations clitics *s(a)* and the strong forms *che* co-occur in the same interrogative sentence and are merged as a single complex wh- word [*Che, sa*]. *Sa*, just like *que* in French and unlike illasi *che* and French *quoi*, has all the defining properties of a clitic: as Poletto & Pollock (2004, 245) show *sa* cannot be separated from the finite verb by phrases like *second ti* (= according to you), cannot be used in isolation, cannot be the objects of prepositions, cannot be coordinated or modified. The doubling in (37) is restricted to a limited subset of wh-items (the counterparts of) ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘where’, and ‘how’. Cecilia has further noted that doubling of this sort first arises in the NIDs with the counterparts of *quoi* and *que*.
- ⇒ No evidence has been provided that *quoi* and *que* should be merged as a complex lexical item. Still, I claim they are sufficiently close –*Que* being the weak form of *quoi* or in Bouchard & Hirschbühler’s (1986) terminology the clitic allomorph of *quoi*– to allow for the deletion of *quoi* by *que* in (35).
- ⇒ Thirdly ε, the tense-less root of the copula, is incapable of licensing traces, unlike tensed and infinitival *être* and matrix predicates. So French resorts to merging demonstrative *ce* in such derivations, as required by French using ε in *Qu’est-ce que* questions. But recourse to *ce* for

⁶ A free relative like *Je mangerai quoi que c'est dans la casserole* (‘I’ll eat what that this is in the pan’= I’ll eat what there is in the pan) strikes me as plausible in that style of French.

that purpose capitalises on a general property of demonstratives (cf. Wiltschko (1998), Pollock (2023)). Assuming all this is on the right track, we now go back to the original riddle:

- (38) Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit?
 (39) a. Où est-ce que c'est qu'il va?
 b. Quand est-ce que c'est qu'il prend ses vacances?
 c. Qui est-ce que c'est qu'il a vu ?

⇒ The analysis offered for solving the *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* puzzle carries over to (38) straightforwardly. Its derivation in (40) only differs from (35) in its first step, which would yield the fine 'in situ' interrogative cleft *C'est quoi qu'il a dit?* if nothing further happened.

- (40) a. [_{TP} **c'est** [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [**qu'il a dit** t_i]]]
 b. [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** [_{FocP} t_i [**qu'il a dit** t_i]]]]]
 c. [_{SC} [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** [_{FocP} t_i [**qu'il a dit** t_i]]]]] **que**]
 d. [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** [_{FocP} t_i [**qu'il a dit** t_i]]]]] **que**]
 e. [_{IntP} **Que**_j [_{εP} t_j **ε** [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** [_{FocP} t_i [**qu'il a dit** t_i]]]]] t_j]]]

At step b *quoi* moves to the pre-*que* focus position, which as such yields the fine colloquial interrogative cleft *Quoi que c'est qu'il a dit?* At step c the whole cleft is merged as the subject of the small clause whose predicate is clitic *que*. As above *que* voids *quoi* at step d, triggering merger of *ce* for licensing/identifying purposes, and the final step has **ε** and IntP merged yielding (40e), the correct parse for (38). The sentences in (39) are derived more economically, as (41) shows:

- (41) a. [_{TP} **c'est qui**_i [**qu'il a vu** t_i]]
 b. [_{FocP} **qui**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il a vu** t_i]]]]]
 c. [_{IntP} **Qui**_i [_{εP} **ε** [_{SC} **ce** t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il a vu** t_i]]]]]]]
 d. [_{TP} **c'est où**_i [**qu'il va** t_i]]
 e. [_{FocP} **où**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il va** t_i]]]]]
 f. [_{IntP} **Où**_i [_{εP} **ε** [_{SC} **ce** t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il va** t_i]]]]]]]
 g. [_{TP} **c'est quand**_i [**qu'il prends ses vacances** t_i]]
 h. [_{FocP} **quand**_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il prend ses vacances** t_i]]]]]
 i. [_{IntP} **Quand**_i [_{εP} **ε** [_{SC} **ce** t_i [**que** [_{TP} **c'est** t_i [**qu'il prend ses vacances** t_i]]]]]]]

5. More on *ce que*.

⇒ The question of how the embedded question in (42) should be analysed must now be faced:

- (42) Je ne sais pas *ce que c'est/était*
 'I don't know this that this is' = I don't know what this is/was

⇒ They are the standard French counterparts of the colloquial (43) and (44):

- (43) J'sais pas quoi que c'est/était
 (44) Je sais pas c'est/était quoi

(43) is the embedded counterpart of (17e) –*Quoi qu'c'est?*– and so is (44) in 'play ground' French (see Poletto & Pollock (2021, appendix)). *C'est/était quoi?* is a fine root question in Standard

French. In both (43) and (44) *quoi* is standing in a focus position, the HLP one in (43) and the post-copula one in (44). Let me then suggest that (42) too starts off as (45), just as (43) and (44) do, where *quoi* is lexical, as it must be:

(45) [ce [est/était [_{FocP} quoi]]]

As (46) shows, in the next steps of the derivation of (42) *quoi* moves to the HLP interrogative/relative slot of all embedded questions in standard French rather than to the HLP pre-*que* focus layer of (43) or to the LLP one of (44):

(46) [Je ne sais pas [_{Int/RelP} quoi_i [que c'est t_i]]]

⇒ That interrogative/relative layer does not check for a focus feature. If it did, all embedded questions and free relatives in French such as *Je ne sais pas ce qu'il a lu, J'aime ce que tu fais* etc. would be ungrammatical. Let me now suggest (47a):

(47) a. Void Relative/Interrogative *quoi* whenever it is not a focus position.

(47a) is very much in the spirit of Hans's (1976, (173)) 'Pas-De-Quoi' rule, which he formulated as in (47b):

(47)b. [_{CP} quoi x que] ⇒ [_{CP} φ x que]

⇒ In (47b) the string to the left of *que* is that of 'standard' interrogatives and relatives. Hans explicitly stated (cf. Obenauer (1976, 120)) that *quoi* in *Quoi qu'il te dise...* was not included in the CP in (47b). This translates into my idea that *quoi* in such relatives is in a focus position, hence not erasable, despite the fact that it *is* in the CP layer. Although Hans's 'Pas-De-Quoi' was formulated in a framework of generative grammar that made crucial use of contexts predicates, extrinsic rule ordering etc. it shares with my (47a) the idea that the phenomenon it attempts to describe is specific to (Modern) French. Naturally a wider scope principle should replace (47a) when/if one is discovered.

⇒ Applying (47a) to (46) will yield (48a) and (48b) upon merging of *ce* for identifying/licensing purposes.⁷

⁷ One should ask why the same derivation does not yield root questions like (i):

(i) **Ce QUOI que tu as fait?

Munaro (1999) observed that there are acceptable root questions of precisely that type in some Northern Italian Dialects. This is illustrated in (ii), (iii) or (iv):

(ii) Sen-che fi-yen? (Valdôtain, Chatillon, Munaro's (3a))

Ce que fais-tu ? = That that you do ? = What are you doing ?

(iii) Chel-ca fiv adess? (Northern Lombard, Albosaggia in Valtellina, Munaro's (8b))

Ce que (tu) fais maintenant ? = That that you do now? = What are you doing now?

(iv) Kwe che devo catar? (Central Northern Piemontesi, Borgofranco d'Ivrea, Munaro's (26a))

Ce que (je) dois acheter = That that (I) must buy? = What should I buy?

Nicola argued in that work that demonstratives like *sen*, *chel* and *kwe* are (re)interpreted as interrogative wh-words preceding and/or agglutinating to the complementiser *che* or *ca*. This does not distinguish these demonstratives from *ce*, which also 'agglutinates' to *que*, the pair coming out as /sk/ phonetically. On the view that *sen/chel/kwe* in such examples, just like French *ce*, are merged to license the null antecedent of these questions it is the unacceptability of French (i) that should be considered unexpected. Why French should differ from those NIDs in that respect remains to be understood.

- (48) a. [Je ne sais pas [_{InterrogativeP} QUOI_i [que c'est t_i]]]
 b. [Je ne sais pas [ce [_{InterrogativeP} QUOI_i [que c'est t_i]]]]

Quoi and its null counterpart are determiners of CHOSE. So the full parse of (42) is (49):

- (48) [Je ne sais pas [ce [_{InterrogativeP} QUOI CHOSE_i [que c'est t_i]]]]

⇒ One should generalise this to all Standard French free relatives and embedded questions, as sketched in (50), even though in (50) the post-verbal input position of the null antecedent is not a focus position. If so the underlying structure of French free relatives and embedded questions are surprisingly close to their overt English counterparts.

- (50) a. **Je ferai** [ce [_{RelP} [QUOI CHOSE]_i [que tu veux t_i]]]
 b. **Je prendrai** [ce [_{RelP} [QUOI CHOSE]_i [que tu me donneras t_i]]]
 c. **Dis moi** [ce [_{IntP} [QUOI CHOSE]_i [que tu veux t_i]]]
 d. **Je ne sais pas** [ce [_{IntP} [QUOI CHOSE]_i [qu'elle me donnera t_i]]]

(47a) cannot replace the idea defended above according to which in, say, *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* and *Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il a dit?* the interrogative clitic *que* voids *quoi*. This is because in the derivations repeated in (51) and (52) the deleted *quoi* is actually standing in the HLP focus position, hence could not be 'voided' by (47a).

- (51) a. [[_{FocP} **quoi**_i [que [_{TP} c'est t_i]]]]
 b. [_{SC} [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [que [_{TP} c'est t_i]]] **que**]
 c. [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [que [_{TP} c'est t_i]]] **que**]
 d. [_{IntP} **Que**_j [_{εP} t_j ε [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [que [c'est t_i]]] t_j]]]
 (52) a. [_{TP} c'est [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [qu'il a dit t_i]]]
 b. [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [que [_{TP} c'est [_{FocP} t_i [qu'il a dit t_i]]]]]
 c. [_{SC} [_{FocP} **quoi**_i [que [_{TP} c'est [_{FocP} t_i [qu'il a dit t_i]]]]] **que**]
 d. [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [que [_{TP} c'est [_{FocP} t_i [qu'il a dit t_i]]]]] **que**]
 e. [_{IntP} **Que**_j [_{εP} t_j ε [_{SC} **ce** [_{FocP} QUOI_i [que [_{TP} c'est [_{FocP} t_i [qu'il a dit t_i]]]]] t_j]]]

6. On *Quoi* and pied-piping of prepositions.

Consider example (53):

- (53) a. A quoi as-tu pensé?
 b. J'ai pensé à quoi tu as pensé
 c. Sur quoi comptes-tu?
 d. Je compte sur quoi tu comptes

Pied piping of *de*, *contre*, *pour*, *en*, *dans*, etc. also yields perfectly fine 'standard' SCLI and C(omplex) I(nversion) questions and free relatives, as illustrated in (54) and (55):

- (54) a. De quoi as-tu peur?
 b. Contre quoi ces gens manifestent-ils ?
 c. Pour quoi ferait-il des efforts ?
 d. En quoi Pierre est-il coupable ?
- (55) a. Je parlerai de quoi tu as parlé
 b. Je manifeste contre quoi ces gens manifestent
 c. Je manifeste pour quoi ils manifestent
 d. Je montrerai en quoi il est coupable

⇒ *Ce* in *ce à quoi*, *ce sur quoi* in (56b) is merged to license/identify the null antecedents crossing over their *quoi* determiner and the preceding preposition, just as the lexical antecedents in (56a) do:

- (56) a. Dis-moi [le sujet sur/à quoi]_i [il travaille t_i]
 b. Dis-moi [ce SUJET sur/à quoi]_i [il travaille t_i]
 c. **Dis-moi [ce SUJET quoi]_i [il travaille t_i]
 d. Dis-moi [ce [QUOI]_i [qu'il travaille t_i]]

⇒ (54), (55), (56a, b) show that lexical *quoi* in Standard French does move to the Interrogative /relative layers of the HLP **if and only if** it pied-pipes a preposition (cf. (56c)). Why is that?
 ⇒ Taking (47a) seriously suggests (57):

(57) Prepositions assign a feature to their complements which bleeds (47a).

⇒ The feature in question is likely to be responsible for the well-known fact that prepositions in French ban clitic pronouns as in (58b) but is unlikely to be a focus feature *per se* because fine examples like (59) should probably be excluded if it was:

- (58) a. Il pense à {lui, elle, eux, toi, moi, quoi}
 b. *Il pense à {le, la, ils, te, me, que}
- (59) a. Cette loi, il a voté contre/pour 'That law, he voted for/against (it)'
 b. Cette loi, il s'est assis dessus 'That law, he sat on (it) (= ignored it)'

Putting aside the (important) question of the exact nature of the feature just hypothesised, (57) will allow lexical *quoi* to survive in all of (53), (54) and (55) despite it having moved to the interrogative layer of the HLP, a non focus position. In (56c) no such 'protection' from (47a) exists which triggers deletion of *quoi*, yielding (56d). (57) also accounts for perfectly fine *P+quoi est-ce que* root questions such as (60) and for quasi minimal pairs like (61a) vs. (61b) vs. (61c):

- (60) a. Sur quoi est-ce qu'elle compte?
 b. A quoi est-ce que tu fais allusion?
- (61) a. En quoi est-ce que ça me regarde ?
 b. Qu' (*quoi) est-ce que tu regardes ?
 c. Quoi (*que) qu'tu regardes?

6. A final riddle:

Let us finally consider the fine clefts in (62):

- (62) a. Qu'est-ce donc que Marie aime ? What is it then that Marie likes?
 b. Qu'était-ce donc que Marie aimait ? What was it then that Marie liked?

⇒ These examples are the *que* variants of the sentences in (63) discussed in the previous section, with one caveat: *Que* in (62) must strand *donc*, while *qui* doesn't have to: *Qui donc est/était-ce que Marie aime/aimait* are fine clefts.

- (63) a. Qui est-ce donc que Marie aime ? Who is it then that Marie likes?
 b. Qui était-ce donc que Marie aimait ? Who was it then that Marie liked?

⇒ The *que* in (62) is a clitic:

- (64) a. *Que, à ton avis, est-ce donc que Marie aime ?
 b. *Que, à ton avis, était-ce donc que Marie aimait ?

⇒ There's no way clitic *que* in (62) can be the interrogative predicate *que* I argued for above: the clefts in (62) are not embedded in a *qu'est-ce que* question. Therefore no (lexical) *quoi* in (70) can be erased by *que* the way it is in (35)-(40). Why then are such clefts well-formed since it appears that clitic *que* has necessarily moved to their focus position? The very same problem arises for 17th century questions like (65), from Molière's *Le Misanthrope*:

- (65) Qu'est-ce donc? Qu'avez-vous?

⇒ Some French speakers still occasionally produce *Qu'est-ce donc?* in jest to imitate 'grand siècle' style rather than (66), to be analysed as *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* was above.

- (66) Qu'est-ce qu'il y a ? Qu'avez-vous ?

⇒ This final puzzle can be solved on the view that in the input of (62) in Modern 'elevated' French the **constituent** *Que+donc* is not a clitic and can bear the focus feature required in (67a) and (68a), though *que*, its clitic determiner, must still cliticise to *est/était* before hopping to IntP –(67b) and (68b) gloss over SCLI 'inverting' subject *ce* and *est/était*—

- (67) a. [C'était [_{FocusP} [que donc]_i [que Marie aimait t_i]
 b. [Que_i était ce [_{FocusP} [t_j donc]_i [que Marie aimait t_j]
 (68) a. [C'était [_{FocusP} [que donc]]
 b. [Que_i était ce [_{FocusP} [t_j donc]]

⇒ Suppressing *donc* in such sentences yields (69), which strike me as unacceptable in Modern French, although perceived by some/many as living fossils ('#'):

- (69) a. */# Qu'était-ce que Marie aimait ?
 b. */# Qu'est/était-ce ?⁸

⁸ Although neither sentence in (69b) belongs to my French *Qu'est-ce?* sounds less 'passé' to my ear than *Qu'était-ce?*. This suggests that *est* in such questions might be analysed as ϵ . If so, *Qu'est-ce?* might still be

7. Concluding remarks.

If the arguments above are correct, they show that Standard English free relatives and their French counterparts in (70)-(71) are surprisingly close structurally despite their massive surface difference and so are (72) and (73) in (literary) English and Italian (cf. Pollock 2023):

- (70) [Ce [QUOI CHOSE_i [que je t'ai dit t_i]]] n'est pas vrai
 (71) [What THING_i] [I told you t_i] isn't true
 (72) [That [THING_i [which I told you t_i]]] isn't true
 (73) [Quel [CHE COSA_i [che ti ho detto t_i]]] non è vero

My analysis also suggests that one crucial element of Hans's earliest work his 'Pas-de Quoi' rule was essentially right. Finally It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the many references above to work with/by Cecilia and Nicola show that my own work over the last 20 years would not have been possible without the extremely productive international collaboration that Hans started and headed for many years within the UMR 7320 program "Architecture of the clause –articulation and interpretation of its functional structure".

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marginally analysed as a *Qu'est-ce?* in *Qu'est + ce QUOI CHOSE_i que c'est t_i?* followed by some implicit free relative. This recalls questions like *Qu'est-ce qu'un homme/un bon livre?* which Munaro & Pollock (2005, 593) argued were derived by *est* deletion from *Qu'est-ce qu'un homme/un bon livre (est)*. The *est* deletion/non lexicalisation analysis of such clauses is supported by the pair in (i), minimally contrasting with (ii). (i) should evidently be seen in the same light as (iii), which argues for the presence of EST in (i).

- (i) Qu'est-ce que cela vs. *ça EST ?
 (ii) Qu'est-ce que c'est cela/ça ?
 (iii) Cela est (bon) vs. *ça est (bon)

How the implicit relative is rebuilt in *Qu'est-ce?* if analysed as sketched here remains to be worked out.

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The last four references and the work this presentation is based on will appear as chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in:

Pollock J-Y (2024) *Studies in Interrogative and Relative syntax in French and Romance*, *Oxford Studies in Comparative Syntax*, OUP.

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