Syntax of CE in French copular sentences  
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Introduction French copular sentences are constructed with the copula être ‘be’ which may sometimes be preceded by a pronominal element ce. In some cases, ce+être alternates with être alone (1); while in other cases, only ce+être is possible 0.

(1)  a.  Jean (c’)est mon meilleur ami.  b.  Jean (c’)est un beau mec  
Jean (CE).is my best friend  Jean (CE).is a handsome guy  
'Jean is my best friend.'  'Jean is a handsome guy.'

(2)  a.  Mon meilleur ami *(c’)est Jean.  b.  Ce que j’aime chez toi *(c’)est ton regard.  
my best friend (CE).is Jean  CE that I like about you (CE).is your gaze  
'My best friend is Jean.'  'What I like about you is your gaze.'

Following Roy & Shlonsky (to appear), we first argue against distributional explanations for ce based on Higgins’ (1973) well-known classification of copular sentences into equatives / identificational / specificational / predicational sentences; and in particular Amary-Coudreau (2014, 2012, 2010) who claims that ce is obligatory in the first three types of copular sentences and excluded in predicational ones. We take the existence of clearly predicational sentences in which ce+être occurs to the exclusion of être alone (3) as evidence that the predicational vs. non-predicational dichotomy lacks adequate explanatory power:

(3)  a.  Les légumes *(c’)est vert.  b.  La musique *(c’)est beau.  
the vegetables (CE).is green  the musique (CE).is beautiful  
'Vegetables are green.'  'Musique is beautiful.'

Moreover, in cases where ce is optional, e.g. (1), we note that the presence of ce does not trigger a change of type in Higgins’ notional typology; and clearly predicative interpretations are possible.

Claim We argue then that the distribution of ce is structurally conditioned. Specifically, we argue that ce is inserted whenever an agreement relationship fails to be established between the ‘thematic’ contentful subject and an element from the PredP bearing active, interpretable phi-features. We assume that all copular sentences derive from a uniform underlying asymmetric ‘small clause’ structure (den Dikken 2006, Roy 2013 a.o.) and that small clauses are headed by a functional head Pred (Bowers 1993, Svenonius 1994). We also assume that the functional domain of the clause involves two distinct subject positions, a lower position Subj1 and a higher Subj2, each with their own interpretive properties (cf., Cardinaletti 1997, 2004, Manzini & Savoia 2005, Polletto 2000, Shlonsky 2000, a.o.). The sources of agreement failure in copular sentences may be diverse, we consider here two cases. In one case, syntactic constraints (Relativized Minimality and criterial freezing) together with focalization (optional in the case of canonical copular sentences (Moro 1997) or obligatory as in the case of inverse ones (Moro 1997)) lead to the inability to move the subject to Subj1 resulting in failure of agreement checking. In the other case, agreement failure results, not from focalization, but from the absence of accessible phi-features on the subject, possibly as the result of a grammatical shift at the interface. What the two have in common is that they force the movement of the subject into the higher of the two subject positions, yielding particular interpretive properties (i.e., presuppositional / generic but not existential).

Canonical copular sentences We assume that canonical copular sentences start out from an asymmetrical PredP small clause to which être is merged (in TP) (4). In a canonically-ordered copular sentence (without ce), the small clause subject is then raised at least as high as Spec/Subj1 (5). Subj1, the ‘lower’ subject position, has unvalued phi-features. In French, we argue, phi-features must be valued by movement (EPP requirement) rather than feature matching (Agree), at is the case in (5).

(4)  [TP est [PredP Jean [PRED [mon meilleur ami]]]]

(5)  Jean SUBJ1 [TP est [PredP Jean [PRED [mon meilleur ami]]]]

Ce is not required in canonical sentences but may be present (cf., (1)). The difference between the variant with and without ce is not truth-conditional but informational: the post-copular element in a
The question is then why *ce* is obligatory in a focal configuration? Focus is rigidly associated with the post-copular position of *ce* sentences, hence it is not a freely-assigned feature but must be encoded in the structure. Extending Rizzi’s (2015) analysis of Italian inverse copular sentences and Rizzi & Shlonsky’s (to appear) analysis of Hebrew ones, we argue that in this configuration the complement of *Pred* is moved to a low focus position in the clause (6). Spec/Foc, however, is a criterial position (in the sense of Rizzi 2006). A criterial position is criterially-frozen for further movement—cf. (7a vs b). Accordingly, the closest candidate for agreement with SUBJ1, i.e. the agreement goal, cannot move to Spec/SUBJ1.

(6) SUBJ1 [TP est [FocP [DP mon meilleur ami] FOC [PredP [DP Jean] [PRED [ce+être mon meilleur ami]]]]]

(7) a. *Que penses-tu que Jean c’est ___?  
   *What do you think that Jean CE is ___?*  
   
   b. Que penses-tu que Jean est ___?  
   *What do you think that Jean is ___?*

We argue that it is precisely the failure of agreement in this configuration, combined with the requirement to check the phi-features on SUBJ1 that triggers external merge of the pronominal expletive *ce* in Spec/SUBJ1. The merge of *ce* has one consequence, however, namely it blocks the movement of the nominal in Spec/Pred to a position higher than *ce*. This problem can be bypassed by assuming, we argue, smuggling (Collins 2005a, 2005b) of this nominal by PredP-raising. As a final step, the subject is moved out of the specifier position in the raised PredP and comes to occupy Spec/SUBJ2.(8)

(8) [DP Jean] SUBJ2 [PredP [ce+être Jean] [PRED [DP mon meilleur ami]]] ... ce SUBJ1 [TP est [FocP [DP mon meilleur ami]]]

Interpretationally, SUBJ2 is presuppositional (Cardinaletti 1997, 2004, a.o.) and, as expected, only permits strong presuppositional subjects eschewing non-presuppositional ones (cf., 9a vs b).

(9) a. Une femme est la directrice du labo.  
   *A woman is the director of+the lab*  
   
   b. *Une femme c’est la directrice du labo.  
   *A woman CE is the director of+the lab*

*Inverse copular sentences* In inverse copular sentences *ce* is obligatory (Amary-Coudreau 2010). The analysis proposed above for canonical *ce* sentences is straightforwardly extended to inverse ones, although in the latter case it is the subject of the PredP small clause that is moved to Spec/focus. We assume these sentences start out from the same asymmetrical predP as in (4) above. However, movement of the predicate out of the small clause violates Relativized Minimality (den Dikken 2006, Mikkelsen 2005, Heycock 2012, a.o.). It has independently been observed that the post-copular element in an inverse copular sentence is focal (Heycock op.cit), this is also true for French (Amary-Coudreau 2012). Thus, the subject of the PredP moves to Spec/Foc. As earlier, low focalization in French has the consequence of barring movement to Spec/Subj1. External merge of *ce* and PredP smuggling generate the right structure:

(10) [DP mon meilleur ami] SUBJ2 [PredP [ce+être Jean] [PRED [DP mon meilleur ami]]] ... ce SUBJ1 [TP est [FocP [ce+être Jean] [PRED [DP mon meilleur ami]]]]

*Predicational* *ce* *sentences with adjectival predicates* In the last case we consider (cf., (3)) the complement of Pred is adjectival and *ce* is obligatory. These structures present two salient properties: absence of agreement between the subject and the adjective and necessary generic reading (e.g. (3b) *La musique* FEM c’est beau.*MASC* ‘Music is beautiful’ (no agreement); vs. *La musique* FEM est belle.*FEM* ‘This music is beautiful’ (agreement)). Following an insight from Danon’s (2012) treatment of sentences involving the pronoun *ce* in Hebrew (which manifest a similar blocking of agreement), and developing Roy & Shlonsky (to appear), we argue that subjects of adjectival *ce*-sentences are phi-opaque and thus cannot satisfy Subj1’s agreement features. As in other cases where an agree operation cannot be successful, *ce* is introduced to satisfy the phi-features of Subj1; this leads to the movement of the subject DP to the high subject position Subj2. As expected, these subjects can only have a strong interpretation, here that of a generic.