

# Compositional vs. constructional meaning The case of French *comme*-N

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## 1. Introduction

Spoken French has a particular kind of Right-Detachment construction, in which the detached element is not linked to an argument but to the predicate of the sentence. This construction occurs commonly in spontaneous speech but is not used in the standard written language. Attested examples are listed in (1), (2), and (3), each involving a minimal discourse context.<sup>1</sup> The relevant portions of the examples are enclosed in square brackets; small caps indicate the location of the main sentence accent, or focus accent:

- (1) Baby-sitter: Je vais vous raconter une belle histoire, marrante.  
'I'm going to tell you a beautiful story, a funny one.'  
(Starts telling story; child interrupts him.)  
Child: [C'est pas MARRANT, comme histoire.] (Reiser)  
'This isn't a funny story.'
- (2) Y'a une espèce de hangar (...) [C'est IMMENSE comme hangar] (F.L.)  
'There's a kind of hangar (...) It's a huge hangar'
- (3) Tourist in Paris to man in the street:  
T: Excusez, Monsieur, pourriez-vous prendre une photo de ma femme et moi devant le Sacré Coeur? (Hands camera to man)  
'Excuse me, Sir, could you take a picture of my wife and me in front of the Sacré Coeur?'  
M: (looking at camera) [C'est CHER, comme appareil, ça.] (Reiser, Ph.)  
'That's an expensive camera.'

The bracketed portions of the examples are semantically equivalent to the standard subject-verb-predicate (SVP) constructs in (4) through (6):

- (4) Ce n'est pas une histoire MARRANTE. 'This isn't a funny story'  
(5) C'est un hangar IMMENSE. 'It's a huge hangar'  
(6) C'est un appareil CHER (ça). 'That's an expensive camera'

Comparing the sentences in the first set with those in the second, we notice that the spoken French construction has the effect of 'dividing up' the content of a standard indefinite predicate NP (*une histoire marrante* in (4), *un hangar immense* in (5), *un appareil cher* in (6)) in such a way that the predicate noun (*histoire, hangar, appareil*) is separated from the adjective which modifies it (*marrant, immense, cher*). While the modifier phrase remains in the canonical post-copular predicate position, the modified noun appears in detached position to the right of the clause. Instead of the indefinite determiner (*un, une*) the noun is preceded by the word *comme*, resulting in a constituent of the form [*comme* N]. I will call the construction illustrated in (1) through (3) the POSTFOCAL COMME-N CONSTRUCTION (or PFCN).

The formal difference between the PFCN and the standard copular SVP construction is schematically represented in (7); the comma between N and AP in (7a) indicates that the two constituents can in principle appear in either order (subject to certain constraints on adjective position in French, which are irrelevant for this paper):

- (7) a. COPULAR SVP CONSTRUCTION:  $\text{S[ c'est NP[ un(e) N, AP ] ]}$   
 b. PFCN CONSTRUCTION:  $\text{S[ S[ c'est AP ] [ comme N ] ]}$

As (7) shows, the single NP constituent in the canonical SVP configuration, which consists of an indefinite article, a noun, and an adjective phrase and which occupies the position of a post-copular predicate phrase, appears in the PFCN construction in the form of two separate constituents, [AP] and [comme N], which are separated from each other by a clause boundary.

I would like to address two theoretical issues raised by the PFCN construction. The first is the semantic issue of the relationship between FORM and MEANING. How does the meaning of the construction as a whole relate to the meaning of its parts? In particular, how can (7b) have the same meaning as (7a)? I will argue that the semantic function of the *comme*-N phrase as a primary predicate is unique to the particular syntactic environment in which it occurs. The meaning of the construction is therefore non-compositional, in the sense that it is not entirely predictable from the meaning of its parts. To account for this non-compositionality I will view the PFCN as a GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTION in the sense of 'Construction Grammar' (Fillmore 1988, Fillmore & Kay 1992), i.e. as a morphosyntactic and prosodic configuration whose form and interpretation cannot be entirely accounted for in terms of other properties of the grammar of the language (or of universal grammar) and which therefore requires independent description (see also Kay & Fillmore 1994, Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor 1988, Goldberg 1995, Manaster-Ramer 1993, Zadrozny & Manaster-Ramer forthcoming, and Zwicky 1994a and 1994b).

The second theoretical issue is the pragmatic issue of the relationship between FORM and USE. Why does the grammar of spoken French have two different structures, (7a) and (7b), to express one and the same propositional meaning? I will argue that the existence and form of the PFCN construction are motivated by the requirements of information structure, given the nature of the relationship between grammar and discourse in spoken French.

My ambition in this paper is to demonstrate that the two theoretical issues, the semantic and the pragmatic one, are not totally independent of each other. Indeed, if the semantic interpretation of the detached phrase is dependent on the specific syntactic environment in which it appears, and if the appearance of the predicate nominal in right-detached position is motivated by discourse requirements, we must conclude that form, meaning, and use are interdependent in this construction.

## 2. The PFCN construction and the Antitopic template

In order to show how form, meaning, and use correlate with each other in the PFCN construction I have to provide the syntactic background which will enable us to categorize the PFCN construction as an instance of a more general syntactic type: the Right-Detachment (or Right-Dislocation) construction. Following an earlier use (Lambrecht 1981, 1986), I will refer to this construction as the ANTITOPIC (A-TOP) construction. In the A-TOP construction, constituents whose denotata have a topic relation to the proposition but which due to the information status of their

referents cannot be expressed in the form of a bound (or 'clitic') pronoun appear sister-adjoined to the right of the clause, forming with it a larger sentence unit. The position to the right of the clause will be referred to as the A-TOP position. The corresponding detached position to the left of the clause will be called TOP position. My syntactic description will be necessarily succinct. For more complete analyses the reader is referred to Lambrecht 1981 and 1986.

Items (8) through (11) contain sentences instantiating the A-TOP template. The syntactic category of the A-TOP constituent is indicated in parentheses after each example. Small caps indicate the location of the focus accent:

- (8) [ [Ils<sub>i</sub> sont FOCUS] [ces Romains]<sub>j</sub> ] 'These Romans are CRAZY' (NP)  
 (9) [ [J'<sub>y</sub> pense SOUVENT] [à cette affaire]<sub>j</sub> ] 'I often THINK of this affair' (PP)  
 (10) [ [C<sub>i</sub>'est DOMMAGE] [qu'il soit parti]<sub>j</sub> ] 'It's a SHAME he left' (QU-S)  
 (11) [ [C<sub>i</sub>'est GENTIL] [de dire ça]<sub>j</sub> ] 'It's NICE of you to say that' (*de*-V-inf)

In (8) through (11), the first pair of brackets contains the clausal portion of the construction, whose final constituent carries the main sentence accent. Following the clause is the A-TOP phrase, which is coindexed with the preverbal pronominal argument.

The basic structure of the A-TOP construction is represented in (12):

- (12) The A-TOP CONSTRUCTION:  $A\text{-TOP-S}[S[pro_i^*+V(XP)^*] A\text{-TOP}[XP_i]^*]$

In (12), *pro* is the bound pronoun, which forms a single constituent with the verb (see e.g. Lambrecht 1981 and Miller & Sag forthcoming). The Kleene stars indicate that the *pro* and *XP* categories may be instantiated more than once. Constituents occurring in A-TOP position are always syntactically speaking optional, in the sense that the clause without the A-TOP constituent is always a syntactically and semantically well-formed sentence. The A-TOP constituent is therefore not an argument of the predicate. Rather it is a kind of sentence adjunct, whose function is to provide the referential information necessary to interpret the pronominal argument (see Lambrecht 1994: Ch. 4). Its semantic relation to the predicate is expressed via the anaphoric link to this pronominal argument, which is syntactically obligatory.

As shown in detail in Lambrecht 1981 and 1986, for an A-TOP construct to be used appropriately the referent of the A-TOP constituent (or rather some mental representation of this referent) must have a high degree of pragmatic accessibility in the discourse. In the terminology of Chafe 1987 and Lambrecht 1994 (Ch. 3), the referent must be 'discourse-active' or 'semi-active', i.e. it must be assumed to be somehow in the addressee's consciousness at the time of utterance or to be accommodatable by the addressee as such (see Ward & Birner, forthcoming, for similar observations about Right-Detachment in English).

Unlike the pronominal argument, which is TOPICAL in the discourse, the lexical (or free pronominal) argument after the verb has a FOCUS relation to the proposition. The verbal denotatum itself is also focal, but the verb is not formally marked as such.<sup>2</sup> The verb and the complement to its right constitute the 'focus domain', which is that syntactic portion of the sentence that expresses the focus of the pragmatically structured proposition. In French, the right boundary of the focus domain is marked by the main sentence accent, or 'focus accent'. Notice that since the preverbal pronominal constituent is a topic expression, and since this expression is nevertheless morphosyntactically bound to V, the syntactic focus domain

Point (i) says that in the PFCN construction the phrase type in A-TOP position cannot be generalized to other phrasal categories, as it can in the ordinary antitopic construction (see examples (8) through (11)); the PFCN only licenses the *comme*-N phrase. Point (ii) shows that, unlike ordinary A-TOP constituents, the *comme*-N phrase is not the extraclausal lexical instantiation of an argument of the verb; there is no verb whose valence requires *comme*-N as an argument. This is clearly shown in (14) above, where the A-TOP NP *le thé* corefers with the bound subject pronoun *ç(a)*, while the cooccurring *comme* phrase does not. Point (iii) indicates that the verb in the PFCN must be of the type which allows its complement to function as a primary predicate. Finally, point (iv) says that the A-TOP constituent in the PFCN does not have the internal syntax required of a referential expression in French: it contains neither a determiner, like *ces* and *cette* in (8) and (9), nor a complementizer in preclausal position, like *que* and *de* in (10) and (11).<sup>4</sup> *Comme* is neither a determiner nor a complementizer.

In sum, while the PFCN construction inherits most of its formal, semantic, and pragmatic features from the A-TOP template, it nevertheless constitutes a construction of its own, requiring independent description in the grammar of French.

As a first step towards understanding the semantic difference between the PFCN and the regular A-TOP construction, let us compare the meaning of our model sentence (13) with that of the corresponding A-TOP sentence in (16):

- (13) C'est IMMENSE comme hangar. 'It's a huge hangar.'  
 (16) Il est IMMENSE ce hangar. 'This hangar is huge.'

In (16), the A-TOP NP *ce hangar* is a topic expression which corefers with the bound pronominal subject *il* and whose purpose is to provide the lexical information necessary to interpret the referent of this subject. In (13), on the other hand, the A-TOP phrase *comme hangar* provides the lexical information needed to determine the category being modified by the intraclausal predicate AP *immense*. While (16) predicates of a given hangar that it is huge, (13) predicates of a given entity that it is a huge hangar. (The latter formulation is somewhat oversimplified and will be revised later on.)

That the *comme*-N denotatum in the PFCN does not have the same relation to the proposition as that of the regular A-TOP constituent is confirmed in (17a) (an attested example), in which the subject is an NP instead of a bound pronoun (the phoneme /z/ before *hommes* is a substandard prefixal plural morpheme):

- (17) a. Les Français ne sont pas plus BEAUX, comme z'hommes. (H. Frei)  
       'The French aren't more handsome men'  
       b. \*Les Français ne sont pas plus BEAUX, les hommes.  
       c. Ils ne sont pas plus BEAUX, les hommes.

While (17a) is well-formed, (17b) is not. An A-TOP sentence of the type illustrated in (8) through (11) requires a coreferential bound pronoun in the clause, as in (17c). In the PFCN construction, however, no coreference link is required, hence the well-formedness of (17a).

That *comme*-N does not have the referential properties of a regular A-TOP constituent is reflected also in its behavior in anaphoric contexts. For example, while it is natural for the denotatum of the antitopic NP in (8) to be anaphorically referred to with a pronoun in a subsequent sentence, as shown in (18),

includes a non-focal element. As in many other cases, focus structure and phrase structure do not map in a one-to-one fashion in this construction.

As I mentioned before, the PFCN construction exemplified in (1), (2), and (3) is an instance of the A-TOP construction. However, it has a number of idiosyncratic properties which make it impossible to simply subsume it under the general A-TOP template in (12). For the discussion to follow, the PFCN construct in (2) will serve as a paradigm example. The relevant portion of (2) is repeated below as (13):

(13) [ [ C'est IMMENSE ] [ comme hangar ] ] 'It's a huge hangar.'

Comparing the bracketing in (13) with that in (8) through (11), we notice that the PFCN construction inherits the following syntactic, prosodic, and semantic features from the A-TOP template in (12):<sup>3</sup>

- (i) the PFCN has two major constituents: a clause of the SVP type in (7a) and a postclausal constituent which is sister-adjoined to it;
- (ii) the clause minus the *comme*-N constituent is a potential complete S (e.g. the sequence *c'est IMMENSE* in (13) is a well-formed complete sentence);
- (iii) the PFCN has the prosodic structure of the A-TOP construction (the focus accent falls at the right clause boundary and the *comme*-N constituent lacks pitch prominence);
- (iv) the denotatum of the *comme*-N phrase is semantically linked to an element in the clause.

(The vague formulation 'semantically linked' in (iv) will be specified later on.) The PFCN construction also inherits two important pragmatic properties from the A-TOP construction, namely the activeness of the *comme*-N denotatum and its non-focal relation to the proposition. I will discuss these properties in Section 4.

That the *comme*-N constituent in the PFCN occurs indeed in the same right-detached position as regular A-TOP phrases can be seen in sentences in which the A-TOP position contains both types of constituents. Compare e.g. the attested (14) with the equally grammatical (15), where the order of the two A-TOP constituents is reversed:

- (14) C<sub>i</sub>'est vachement COURANT ici [comme boisson] [le thé]<sub>i</sub>. (Webb)  
'Tea is a very common drink here'
- (15) C<sub>i</sub>'est vachement COURANT ici [le thé]<sub>i</sub> [comme boisson].

If the right-detached NP in (15) is in A-TOP position, then so must be the *comme*-N phrase which follows it. As I have shown elsewhere (Lambrecht 1981), constituents occurring in TOP and A-TOP position may be freely ordered with respect to each other in French, in contrast to intraclausal argument constituents, whose order is to a high degree fixed. A similar observation is made by Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) about the syntax of topic NPs in Chicheŵa.

The PFCN construction DIFFERS from the A-TOP template in at least the following respects:

- (i) the A-TOP constituent is partly lexically specified, i.e. it is not an XP;
- (ii) the *comme*-N constituent is not coindexed with a bound pronoun inside the clause;
- (iii) the verb must be a copula or a copula-like predicator;
- (iv) the *comme*-N constituent is not a referring expression.

- (18) Ils<sub>i</sub> sont fous [ces Romains]<sub>j</sub>. Ils<sub>i</sub> me font rire.  
 'These Romans are crazy. They make me laugh.'

such an anaphoric link would be quite unnatural in the case of the *comme-N* denotatum of a PFCN sentence. Consider the following set of examples:

- (19) a. C'est pas marrant, [comme histoire]<sub>j</sub>. ??Elle<sub>i</sub> est plutôt ennuyeuse.  
 'This isn't a funny story. It's rather boring.'  
 b. Ceci n'est pas [une histoire marrante]<sub>j</sub>. ??Elle<sub>i</sub> est plutôt ennuyeuse.  
 'This isn't a funny story. It's rather boring.'  
 c. [Cette histoire]<sub>j</sub> n'est pas marrante. Elle<sub>i</sub> est plutôt ennuyeuse.  
 'This story isn't funny. It's rather boring.'

In (19a) the anaphoric feminine subject pronoun *elle* in the second sentence can hardly be construed as referring to the denotatum of the (feminine gender) noun *histoire*. With respect to anaphoricity, the *comme-N* phrase in the PFCN behaves in the same way as the predicate nominal of a canonical SVP construction (see (19b)). The anaphoric relation is unproblematic, however, if the noun *histoire* occupies the subject position of the preceding sentence, as shown in (19c).

The fact that the *comme-N* denotatum in the PFCN cannot be anaphorically referred to with a personal pronoun shows that this constituent does not set up a DISCOURSE REFERENT, in the sense of Karttunen 1976. This non-discourse-referential nature of the *comme-N* phrase is a natural consequence of the fact that this phrase functions as part of the predicate rather than as an argument.

The semantic status of the *comme-N* phrase also precludes its analysis as an ADJUNCT to the predicate, in spite of a number of similarities between the two categories. Consider the adverbial phrase *ce soir* 'tonight' in (20):

- (20) a. Elle VIENDRA ce soir                    'She's COMING tonight'  
 b. Elle VIENDRA ce soir, ta soeur.       'She's COMING tonight, your sister'  
 c. Elle VIENDRA ta soeur, ce soir.       'She's COMING, your sister, tonight'

Like the *comme-N* phrase, the adverbial *ce soir* appears in A-TOP position (hence with topic function) in (20a). This is demonstrated both by the similarity in prosody and by the fact that, just like *comme boisson* in (15), the adverbial may follow another (anaphoric) A-TOP constituent, as shown in (20c). And as with *comme-N*, the order of the two elements in A-TOP position is free, as a comparison of (20b) and (20c) reveals. Finally, the *comme-N* phrase and the time adverbial have in common that they occur without an anaphoric link to a pronominal element within the clause.

But the analogy ends here. First, an adjunct phrase may not only appear in A-TOP position, as in (20), but also in left-detached TOP position as well as in clause-final focus position:

- (21) a. Ce soir, elle VIENDRA.  
 b. Elle viendra CE SOIR.  
 c. Elle viendra CE SOIR, ta soeur.

In contrast, the *comme-N* constituent of the PFCN can only occur in A-TOP position and with A-TOP intonation (see Section 4). Second, while the internal syntax of the *comme-N* constituent is fixed, an adverbial in A-TOP position may appear under any form compatible with adverbial function. For example, instead of *ce soir* in (20) we could find *ce dernier soir* 'this last evening,' or any other variant.

As a corollary, adverbials like *ce soir* freely cooccur with any predicate (barring pragmatic incongruity), while *comme-N* can only occur with those verbs which may take a predicate nominal as a complement. By its adjunct function *ce soir* differs thus sharply from the *comme-N* phrase in the PFCN. While the latter functions predicatively, the adverbial adds an argument to a proposition, referring to the time at which the event expressed in the predicate takes place.

In sum, while the PFCN construction is in many respects similar to the regular A-TOP construction, it nevertheless differs from it both semantically and formally. The *comme-N* constituent does not have the internal and external syntax of an ordinary referential expression. It functions neither as an argument of, nor as an adjunct to, a predicate. It is a phrasal category of its own, whose semantic function is that of a predicate nominal.

### 3. Semantics of the *comme-N* phrase

In French, bare N's occur only in a limited number of environments. One of these environments is that of the predicate-nominal construction exemplified in (22):

(22) Elle est médecin. 'She's a doctor.'

In this construction, the nominal denotes a kind of function of the subject. (The bare N in the latter construction is often categorized as an 'adjective' in traditional grammars.) The bare-predicate-N construction in (22) has in common with the PFCN that it contains a bare N which functions predicatively. However, the two constructions are clearly not equivalent functionally. For example, while a PFCN construct like (23a) is well-formed, its counterpart in (23b) is not:

(23) a. Elle est CONNUE comme médecin 'She's a well-known doctor'  
b. \*Elle est médecin CONNUE.

Moreover, in the bare-predicate-N construction the noun denotatum is restricted to certain professional functions such as *ouvrier* 'worker', *professeur* 'teacher', *balayeur de rue* 'street sweeper' etc., whereas no comparable restriction is found in the PFCN. Finally, in the bare-predicate-N construction the verb must be the copula *être* 'to be' or *devenir* 'to become', while in the PFCN certain other verbs may occur. Compare (24a) with (24b):

(24) a. Ça a l'air marrant comme histoire. 'This looks like a funny story.'  
b. \*Elle a l'air médecin. 'She looks like a doctor.'

Another environment in which a bare N commonly occurs in French is that of the prepositional phrase headed by *sans* 'without'. Consider (25a):

(25) a. sans argent 'without money'  
b. \*avec argent 'with money'  
c. avec de l'argent 'with money'

The structure in (25a) seems to parallel that of *comme hangar* in (13). And this formal parallel correlates again with a similarity in semantic interpretation: in both constructions, the noun does not designate a discourse referent (neither expression warrants the use of an anaphoric pronoun). In this respect *sans* contrasts with its antonym *avec* 'with', as shown in (b) and (c). In the phrase 'with money' the noun is discourse-referential, therefore it cannot occur in its bare form in French.

There is, however, an important difference between *sans* and *comme*. While the former may well be followed by a full NP, as e.g. in *sans mon argent* 'without my money' (in which case the NP is fully referential), the latter may not: a sentence like \**C'est IMMENSE comme mon hangar* is ungrammatical. The PFCN construction is incompatible with full NPs. The syntactic structure of the *comme*-N constituent ties in directly with its semantic function as a predicate nominal.

A revealing property of the *comme*-N phrase is that its noun may not be freely MODIFIED. While the clause-final AP position in the PFCN may be filled with any semantically appropriate adjective, in the post-clausal *comme*-N phrase only those adjectival modifiers may occur whose function is to indicate a SUBCATEGORY of the category denoted by the noun, rather than an EXEMPLAR of a category. Consider the following sets of examples; in each set, the first example contains a standard SVP sentence while the second (and third) contains the corresponding PFCN construct:

- |      |                                       |                                      |
|------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (26) | a. C'est un vin cher.                 | 'This is an expensive wine.'         |
|      | b. C'est CHER comme vin.              | 'This is an expensive wine.'         |
| (27) | a. C'est un bon vin cher.             | 'This is a good expensive wine.'     |
|      | b. *C'est CHER comme bon vin.         | 'This is a good expensive wine.'     |
|      | c. *C'est BON comme vin cher.         | 'This is a good expensive wine.'     |
| (28) | a. C'est un vin rouge cher.           | 'This is an expensive red wine.'     |
|      | b. C'est CHER comme vin rouge.        | 'This is an expensive red wine.'     |
| (29) | a. C'est une belle voiture.           | 'This is a beautiful car.'           |
|      | b. C'est BEAU comme voiture.          | 'This is a beautiful car.'           |
| (30) | a. C'est une belle voiture chère.     | 'This is a beautiful expensive car.' |
|      | b. *C'est BEAU comme voiture chère.   | 'This is a beautiful expensive car.' |
|      | c. *C'est CHER comme belle voiture.   | 'This is a beautiful expensive car.' |
| (31) | a. C'est une belle voiture de sport.  | 'This is a beautiful sports car.'    |
|      | b. C'est BEAU comme voiture de sport. | 'This is a beautiful sports car.'    |

Among the PFCN constructs whose *comme*-N phrase contains a modified N, those in (28) and (31) are well-formed, whereas those in (27) and (30) are not. This is so because the sequences *vin rouge* and *voiture de sport* are compound formations which conventionally denote subtypes of the superordinate types *vin* and *voiture*. In contrast, the modification constructions *bon vin* or *vin cher* in (27) and *voiture chère* or *belle voiture* in (30) do not conventionally denote such types. The generalization that the *comme*-N phrase contains a bare N can thus be maintained.

Let us now compare the function of *comme*-N in the PFCN construction with its use in other environments. When followed by a bare noun, the word *comme* ordinarily expresses what might be called a ROLE-SPECIFYING function, comparable to that of the English word *as*.<sup>5</sup> This function is illustrated in (32):

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| (32) | a. Il a été engagé comme PROGRAMMEUR.                                   | 'He was hired as a programmer.'  |
|      | b. Comme PROGRAMMEUR, il est pas MAL, mais comme LINGUISTE, il est NUL. | 'As a programmer he's not bad, but as a linguist he's a total wash-out.' |

In (32), the phrase *comme programmeur* functions as a SECONDARY PREDICATE indicating the role of the individual in question in a particular job situation, comparable to English *as a programmer*. Consequently, role-specifying *comme*-N

welcomes only those nouns whose denotata can be construed as expressing a role. No such semantic constraint holds in the environment of the PFCN.

In the role-specifying use, the constituent headed by *comme* also differs from that in the PFCN in that it sometimes licenses the use of a determiner: instead of *comme programmeur* in (32a) we could also find *comme mon programmeur* 'as my programmer', etc. In contrast, no determiner may occur in the PFCN construction. Finally, in its role-specifying function the *comme* phrase may freely appear in clause-final focus position, as in (32a), as well as in TOP position, as in (32b), while in the context of the PFCN it is barred from these positions (see below). Syntactically and prosodically, role-specifying *comme-N* behaves like the adjunct *ce soir* in (20) and (21).

The semantic difference between the two uses of *comme-N* is further illustrated in (33) (the @ symbol indicates pragmatic incongruity):

- (33) a. Il est DOUÉ comme mec. 'He's a talented GUY.'  
 b. @ Il est doué comme MEC.  
 'He's talented as a GUY. / \*He's a talented GUY.'

(33a) is a PFCN construct. (33b), however, in which the *comme-N* phrase appears in clause-final focus position, does not have a PFCN reading but is necessarily interpreted as role-specifying, in spite of the ensuing pragmatic incongruity. While (a) is perfectly natural, (b) is odd, to say the least: being a guy is not normally thought of as a role for which one can be more or less talented (although such an interpretation is certainly imaginable).

Notice that, like the temporal adjunct *ce soir* in (20), role-specifying *comme-N* may also appear in A-TOP position, resulting in an ambiguous structure:

- (34) a. Elle est BONNE comme actrice.  
 'She's a good ACTRESS. / She's GOOD as an actress.'  
 b. Elle est bonne comme ACTRICE, mais pas comme CHANTEUSE.  
 'She's good as an ACTRESS but not as a SINGER. / \*She's a good ACTRESS but not a good SINGER.'

In one of its interpretations, (34a) parallels the PFCN sentence in (33a). In the other, the A-TOP phrase has the role-specifying function. In contrast, (34b) is not ambiguous. As in (33b), no PFCN reading is available with focal *comme-N*.

Nor does the *comme-N* phrase in the PFCN construction have the DOMAIN-SPECIFYING meaning of 'for a N' or 'as N's go' which one might expect given the use of *as* in English. Thus (13) does not mean 'It's huge, as hangars go' or 'It's huge, for a hangar.' To express the domain-specifying function, a French speaker might use the phrase [*pour un N*], as in (35):

- (35) a. Il est pas MAL, pour un Allemand. 'He's not bad, as Germans go'  
 b. Pour un ALLEMAND, il est pas MAL. 'For a German, he's not bad'

Notice that in (35b) *pour un Allemand* appears in TOP position, comparable to the role-specifying *comme programmeur* in (32b). As we saw before, the *comme-N* phrase in the PFCN is excluded from this position (but see endnote 7).

The difference between the function of the *comme-N* phrase in the PFCN and that of *pour un N* in (35) becomes particularly clear in the contrast in (36). While (36a) is meaningful, (36b) is near-contradictory:

- (36) a. Il est assez INTELLIGENT pour un con. 'He's pretty SMART for a jerk.'  
 b. ?Il est assez INTELLIGENT comme con. 'He's a pretty smart JERK.'

Since in (36a) *pour un con* is in A-TOP position, its denotatum is assumed to be topical in the discourse, hence necessarily taken for granted. The sentence thus presupposes that the individual in question is a jerk and asserts that on the scale of jerkhood he ranks relatively low. (36b) also presupposes that the individual is a jerk, but it asserts that the individual in question is a jerk of the intelligent kind, a statement which can be interpreted as meaningful only if being intelligent and being a jerk are not taken to exclude each other logically.

To sum up, in the grammatical environment of the PFCN construction the phrasal unit which consists of the word *comme* followed by a bare N is semantically idiosyncratic. Even though the function of each of its two constituents is found elsewhere in the grammar of French (*comme* is known to head a predicate phrase, bare N's are known to function predicatively), the meaning of the *comme*-N phrase in the PFCN is not predictable on the basis of these similarities. As initially suggested in the juxtaposition of the structures in (7), the semantic function of *comme* + N in (7b) is the same as that of the sequence [un(e) + N] in the copular SVP construction in (7a). The *comme*-N denotatum is semantically interpreted as part of the primary predicate of the sentence. The function of the *comme*-N constituent in the PFCN is to express the category which is modified by the intraclausal focal adjective and of which the subject denotatum is an instance.

Having established the semantic equivalence of the PFCN with the canonical SVP construction, I will now turn to the second theoretical issue raised in the Introduction. What motivates the considerable formal difference between the two synonymous sentences in (7), in particular, how to account for the rather unusual syntactic separation of the predicate noun from its adjectival modifier in the PFCN construction? I will argue that this difference is motivated by (but does not follow from) the nature of the relationship between syntactic structure and information structure in spoken French.

#### 4. Information structure of the PFCN construction

Let us consider again the role-specifying *comme*-N construction illustrated in (32). In addition to the semantic and syntactic differences between this type and the PFCN construction, (32) also points to an important PROSODIC, hence information-structural, difference between the two. In (32a), the phrase *comme programmeur* carries the main sentence accent, indicating that its denotatum has a focus relation to the proposition. (32a) could serve as a reply to a WH-question like 'What kind of job was he hired for?' In the reply, the denotatum 'comme programmeur' provides the element of information requested via the WH-expression. In (32b), the phrases *comme programmeur* and *comme linguiste* appear in TOP position and function as contrastive topic expressions (see Lambrecht 1994, Section 5.5). (32b) could serve e.g. as a reply to an inquiry about an individual's performance as a programmer and a linguist. Both in (a) and in (b), the *comme*-phrase necessarily receives a pitch accent.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the construction illustrated in (32), the PFCN construction precludes accentuation of the *comme*-N constituent. This prosodic constraint was illustrated in (33b) and (34b). Consider also the following variants of examples (2) and (3), which parallel the syntactic and prosodic structures in (32):

- (2') a. \*C'est immense comme HANGAR.  
 b. ?Comme HANGAR, c'est IMMENSE.
- (3') a. \*C'est cher comme APPAREIL, ça.  
 b. ?Comme APPAREIL, c'est CHER, ça.

The unaccentability of the *comme*-N phrase in the PFCN construction is an automatic consequence of the fact that it is confined to the A-TOP position of the sentence, which is reserved for topical denotata which have been activated in recent discourse and which therefore may remain unaccented.<sup>7</sup>

What, then, is the reason for the occurrence of the *comme*-N phrase in A-TOP position? To answer this question, let us begin by observing that the standard SVP construction in (7a), which is exemplified in (4) through (6), is pragmatically ambiguous in a subtle way. (This pragmatic ambiguity is also observable in the English glosses of all PFCN sentences.) Consider again the canonical SVP version of our paradigm sentence (13):

(5) C'est un hangar IMMENSE. 'It's a huge HANGAR.'

(5) can be used either to inform the addressee that the entity referred to with the subject pronoun  $c(a)$  is a huge hangar, or it can be used to inform the addressee that the given entity, which the interlocutor already knows to be a hangar, is huge. The sentence could either answer the question 'What's that?' or the question 'What size hangar is that?' In the first case, sentence (5) could be informally glossed as 'This thing is a hangar, and it's huge', and in the second case as 'This thing, which is a hangar, is huge'. The difference between the two readings is a difference in the scope of the focus in the pragmatically structured proposition.<sup>8</sup>

The two focus construals of (5) are represented in (37) and (38):

(37) [ C'est NP<sub>[+foc]</sub>[ un hangar AP<sub>[ IMMENSE ] ] ]</sub>

(38) [ C'est NP[ un hangar AP<sub>[+foc]</sub>[ IMMENSE ] ] ]

In (37) the entire predicate NP denotatum is in focus; in (38) only the denotatum of the modifier WITHIN the NP is focal. As for the pragmatic status of the copula *est* 'is', I take it to be irrelevant for the information structure of the construction (see footnote 2). A more explicit representation of the two construals of (5) is given in (37') and (38'):<sup>9</sup>

- |       |                 |  |
|-------|-----------------|--|
| (37') | Sentence:       | C'est un hangar IMMENSE.   |
|       | Presupposition: | 'entity denoted by subject pronoun <i>c</i> ' has property <i>x</i> '        |
|       | Assertion:      | ' <i>x</i> = a huge hangar'  |
|       | Focus:          | '(is) a huge hangar'   |
|       | Focus Domain:   | NP (VP)  |
| (38') | Sentence:       | C'est un hangar IMMENSE.   |
|       | Presupposition: | (i) 'entity denoted by subject pronoun <i>c</i> ' is a token of type hangar' |
|       |                 | (ii) 'entity denoted by subject pronoun <i>c</i> ' has property <i>x</i> '   |
|       | Assertion:      | ' <i>x</i> = huge'   |
|       | Focus:          | 'huge'   |
|       | Focus Domain:   | AP   |

(The formulation of the presupposition in (38') will be modified later on.) (37') and (38') have in common the topicality presupposition attached to the subject pronoun  $c(a)$ , i.e. in both readings the entire proposition is to be pragmatically construed as adding to the hearer's knowledge of the topic entity denoted by the subject expression. But while (37') has only this topicality presupposition, (38')

has the additional knowledge presupposition indicated in (i). This difference correlates with the difference in focus scope.

The PFCN differs crucially from the standard French construction in (5) in that it is NOT pragmatically ambiguous in this way. In the PFCN construction, the denotatum of the *comme*-N phrase is PRESUPPOSED in the discourse, while that of the intraclausal AP constituent represents the FOCUS (or part of the focus) of the utterance. This pragmatic feature of the PFCN construction can be seen in the attested examples (1), (2), and (3). In (1), it is obviously known to the interlocutor that what the baby-sitter is doing is telling a story. The denotatum *histoire* can therefore be taken for granted. In (2), the fact that the subject entity is a hangar is known from the immediately preceding sentence, in which it was referred to as *une espèce de hangar* 'a kind of hangar'. In (3) the entity under discussion is in the speaker's hands, who obviously assumes that its owner knows that it is a camera.

This presuppositional feature of the *comme*-N denotatum is reflected in the constraint on noun modifiers illustrated in (26) through (31). Recall that in the PFCN the *comme*-N phrase welcomes only those modifiers that indicate a subtype of the type denoted by the noun. We now understand the pragmatic motivation for this constraint. Since the *comme*-N denotatum is presupposed to be known to the addressee, modifiers which associate a 'new' denotatum with the noun are pragmatically incompatible with the construction.

As noted in Section 2, for an A-TOP construct to be used appropriately, it is not sufficient that the denotatum of the A-TOP referent be KNOWN to the addressee. It must also have a high degree of ACTIVENESS in the discourse. It is easy to see that in all occurrences of the PFCN construction this activeness condition is satisfied: since the portion of the predicate which is expressed in the *comme*-N phrase denotes a known property of the subject, and since the subject itself is discourse-active at the time of speech (it is expressed in pronominal form), the *comme*-N denotatum is necessarily pragmatically highly accessible. It is difficult to imagine how an entity whose category membership is known to a person could be active in the person's mind without the category of which it is a member being somehow active at the same time. As I argue in Lambrecht 1994 (Section 3.4), every time a token is activated, its type becomes active too.

It will be useful to test this analysis of the information-structure of the PFCN construction on the basis of a discourse context in which the construction could NOT be used appropriately. Consider the following variant of example (2):

- (39) We saw a strange-looking building which aroused our curiosity. We parked in front of it and peeked through one of the windows:
- a. C'était un immense HANGAR. 'It was a huge hangar'
  - b. #C'était IMMENSE comme hangar. 'It was a huge hangar'

In this modified context, the use of the PFCN sentence in (b) is highly inappropriate. This is so because in (39) the fact that the building is a hangar is not known at the time of utterance. In this situation, only the canonical SVP structure in (a) can be used.

Let us apply the pragmatic generalization suggested by these and similar examples to our paradigm sentence (13). Unlike its canonical counterpart in (5), (13) does not fit the information-structure representation in (37'), in which the focus domain is NP. (13) is compatible only with the presupposition in (38'), i.e. it must be used in a discourse context in which it is assumed to be already known to the addressee that the subject entity is a token of type 'hangar'.

The relevant information-structure differences between the PFCN and the standard SVP construction are represented in (40) (the features [foc] and [act] stand for 'focal' and 'activated' respectively):

- (40) PFCN:  $A\text{-TOP}_S[ S[ \text{pro}+V[+\text{pred}] AP[+\text{foc}] ] A\text{-TOP}[ \text{comme } N[-\text{foc}, +\text{act}] ] ]$   
 SVP:  $S[ \text{pro}+V[+\text{pred}] NP[ \text{un(e)} N[+/-\text{foc}, +/-\text{act}] , AP[+\text{foc}] ] ]$

As the different feature values on the N in the two constructions reveal, the PFCN is MARKED for two pragmatic features for which the standard SVP construction is UNMARKED, i.e. the non-focal and discourse-active status of the denotatum of the predicate noun. The syntactic difference between the two constructions thus directly reflects the difference in information structure. By virtue of its appearance in A-TOP position, the denotatum of the *comme*-N constituent is necessarily construed as being both known and active (or quasi-active) in the discourse. It is this combination of a knowledge presupposition with a consciousness presupposition that motivates the inheritance of the A-TOP template by the PFCN construction. We can say that the form of the PFCN construction is motivated by the need to pragmatically disambiguate the canonical SVP construction.

To recapitulate, for the PFCN construct in (13) to be used appropriately in a discourse, the following pragmatic conditions must be satisfied (the list includes those conditions which (13) and (5) have in common):

- (i) the entity denoted by the subject pronoun *c'* must be active in the discourse (e.g. as an object on a table in front of the interlocutors or as an item recently mentioned in the discourse);
- (ii) this entity must be a topic under discussion and the proposition expressed by the sentence must be construable as conveying relevant new information about this topic;
- (iii) the fact that this entity is a hangar must be assumed to be already known to the addressee or to be pragmatically accommodatable as such;
- (iv) the addressee must be presently aware of the fact that the entity is a hangar (this is a corollary of (i) and (iii)).

The pragmatic assertion made in uttering sentence (13) consists then in providing a comment about the topic entity designated with the subject pronoun *c'* by substituting the denotatum 'huge' for the variable in the pragmatically presupposed open proposition 'entity *c'* is an x hangar', where x represents the missing piece of information. In other words, by uttering this sentence, the speaker wishes to inform the addressee that the given token, which the addressee knows to be of type 'hangar', has the property of being huge.

The information-structure features formally evoked in sentence (13) are summarized in the schema in (41):

- (41) Sentence: C' est IMMENSE comme hangar.  
 Presupposition: (i) 'referent denoted by *c'* is discourse-active'  
 (ii) 'referent denoted by *c'* is topic for comment *x'*'  
 (iii) 'referent denoted by *c'* is a token of type hangar'  
 (iv) 'presupposition (iii) is discourse-active'  
 Assertion: 'x = huge'  
 Focus: '(is) huge'  
 Focus domain: AP (VP)

Presupposition (i) is evoked by the pronominal coding of the referent: pronouns can be appropriately used only if their referents are assumed to be discourse-active at the time of speech. Presupposition (ii) is evoked by the global topic-comment structure of the clause, which is expressed in particular via the presence of a focus accent on the verb phrase and via the unaccented subject pronoun (all unaccented referential pronouns are topic expressions, see Lambrecht 1994: Ch. 4).<sup>10</sup> Presupposition (iii) is evoked by the global structure of the A-TOP construction (of which the PFCN is a variety), which requires that the denotatum of an A-TOP constituent be pragmatically recoverable for the hearer in the utterance context. Presupposition (iv) is evoked by the absence of a pitch accent on the noun *hangar*. As noted earlier, this presupposition is entailed by presuppositions (i) and (iii).

### 5. The constructional meaning of the PFCN

The pragmatic features listed in (41), together with the formal and semantic features discussed in the preceding sections, define the PFCN construction and distinguish it from all other constructions in the language. It is important to acknowledge that these pragmatic features are not merely conversational implicata suggested by the context. They are conventionally associated with the lexicogrammatical structure in the same way that its semantic features are associated with it.

Some of these pragmatic features are extremely common and widely attested across languages, such as the activeness feature associated with pronominal expressions. Others belong to particular constructions or construction types, such as the pragmatic accessibility feature attached to the denotata of A-TOP constituents in the antitopic template. In the case of the PFCN construction, which belongs to the antitopic type, the global presuppositional structure is rather specific: it restricts the use of a copular subject-predicate construction to discourse contexts in which the denotatum of a predicate nominal is in the presupposition while that of the adjective modifying it is in focus.

In analyzing the PFCN as a grammatical construction in the sense of CG, we are allowing for the fact that it is semantically NON-COMPOSITIONAL, in the sense that at least some aspects of its meaning are not the predictable sum of the lexical meanings of its components. Nowhere else in the grammar of French does the two-word sequence [*comme* N] have the meaning it has in the syntactic environment of the PFCN. This meaning must therefore be inherent in the particular morphosyntactic and prosodic configuration, i.e. in the grammatical construction as a whole.

An alternative to the constructional approach proposed here would be to stipulate a separate LEXICAL ENTRY for *comme*, which would contain the meaning needed to account for the PFCN construction, thereby saving the postulate (as expressed e.g. in the Projection Principle of the Government and Binding theory) according to which all sentence meaning is projected from the lexicon. However, this alternative approach cannot be correct. Besides the fact that it would be difficult to define the special function of *comme* in lexical rather than relational terms (being a predicate is not a lexical but a propositional property), this approach cannot account for the fact that the sequence *comme*+N functions as a primary predicate ONLY in the specific syntactic environment of the PFCN construction. To say that a function arises only in a particular syntactic environment is to say that it is a property of this environment.

Another alternative approach would be one in which the meaning of the PFCN would be made to follow from general pragmatic principles of interpretation. Thus one might propose that the interpretation of *comme*-N in the PFCN environment is due to an implicature which would somehow arise from the non-

focal status of its denotatum in the proposition. Assuming (wrongly, I think) that such an implicature could be motivated, this approach could not explain the facts in (33) and (34). In (34a), the *comme*-N phrase occurs in A-TOP position and nevertheless the sentence is ambiguous between the PFCN and the role-specifying reading. In the role-specifying reading, *comme*-N is compatible with either focus or topic status, but in the PFCN reading it is not. Moreover, the impossibility of the PFCN reading in (33b) and (34b), where the *comme*-N constituent is in focus position, cannot be explained by saying that this reading is preempted by the role-specifying reading, since both readings do coexist in (34a).

Thus it is not the lexical meaning of *comme* alone that determines the meaning of the *comme*-N phrase in a PFCN sentence but its occurrence in a highly specific syntactic environment. The interpretive mechanism whereby the A-TOP template imparts a special meaning to the *comme*-N phrase in the PFCN construction is comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the way in which the non-lexically-filled 'argument-structure constructions' discussed by Goldberg (1995) impart their meanings to the verb-complement sequences which instantiate them. To take one of Goldberg's examples, in the sentence *She sneezed the napkin off the table* the intransitive verb *sneeze* can be said to have taken on an additional construction-specific meaning: that of a transitive verb expressing a caused motion. As Goldberg argues, the verb takes on this additional meaning by virtue of its occurrence in the 'caused-motion construction', which is more typically instantiated by such sentences as *She shoved the book into her backpack* or *She pushed the table against the wall*. The verb *sneeze* INHERITS the caused-motion interpretation from the grammatical construction in which it occurs. In a similar way, we can say that in a PFCN construct like *C'est IMMENSE comme hangar*, the *comme*-N constituent has taken on a construction-specific meaning by virtue of its occurrence in the A-TOP position of the antitopic template.

The claim that the meaning of the PFCN is construction-specific does by no means imply that the relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary or random in this construction. The form-meaning relation in the PFCN is MOTIVATED because its relevant features occur elsewhere in the grammar of French. Two features are salient in this respect. The first is the occurrence of the word *comme* in combination with a bare noun. A French speaker knows that in the phrase [*comme* N] the noun functions predicatively. The second is the occurrence of this *comme*-N phrase in the post-clausal A-TOP position of the antitopic construction. A speaker of French knows (i) that any denotatum that occurs in A-TOP position is presupposed to be non-focal and active or quasi-active in the discourse, and (ii) that such a denotatum is coconstructed with an element inside the clause.

The PFCN inherits these two features, one semantic, the other pragmatic, from the secondary-predication construction involving [*comme* N] and from the A-TOP template, respectively. The meaning and use of the PFCN construction can therefore be seen as the partial result of the combination of these two features. However, this semantic result cannot be PREDICTED. There is no rule according to which a sentence expressing this meaning under these discourse conditions must have this particular form. It is in this sense that the PFCN construction can be said to be semantically non-compositional.

The PFCN construction belongs to a general and frequently-used template, the A-TOP construction in (12), whose *raison d'être* is to allow a constituent coding a non-focal denotatum of high pragmatic salience to appear in extraclassical position, as a right sister to the clause that expresses the proposition in which this denotatum plays a semantic role. In spoken French, nominal expressions other than bound pronouns whose denotata have a non-focal relation to the proposition regularly occur in extra-clausal position rather than inside the clause, their semantic relation to the proposition being determined by construction-specific rules of construal. The

form of the A-TOP template, hence that of the PFCN, is PRAGMATICALLY MOTIVATED, in the sense that it is a manifestation of a general information-structure principle governing the distribution of phrasal constituents in the French sentence.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, naturally-occurring examples are followed by a parenthetical indication of the source. Examples without such indication are made up.

<sup>2</sup> The different status of predicates and arguments with respect to the formal expression of the focus relation is discussed in Schmerling 1976 (Chapter 5), Selkirk 1984 (Chapter 5), and Lambrecht 1994 (Section 5.4).

<sup>3</sup> For theoretical statements concerning the relation of 'inheritance' among grammatical constructions in CG see Fillmore & Kay 1992, Kay & Fillmore 1994, Goldberg 1993 and in 1995 (Chapter 3), Koenig 1993, and Michaelis 1994.

<sup>4</sup> That the word *de* in (11) is a COMP element, rather than a preposition, is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that the valence of the predicator *gentil* 'nice' does not include a prepositional complement; see Huot 1981.

<sup>5</sup> In French dictionaries, the meaning of *comme* is typically defined with synonyms like *en qualité de* (Littré 1870), *en tant que* (Dictionnaire Hachette 1980), *en, pour, tant, en tant que* (Robert 1958), *en tant que, en qualité de* (Grand Larousse de la Langue Française 1972), all of which approximate the meaning of English *as*. These definitions apply exclusively to the role-specifying use of *comme*-N. None of the dictionaries I have consulted acknowledge the meaning of *comme*-N in the PFCN construction.

<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 5 of Lambrecht 1994 I argue—against the prevalent view as represented e.g. in Selkirk 1984—that sentence accents may indicate either focal or topical denotata. This accounts for the two accents in (32b): the first is a topic accent, the second a focus accent. However with a few motivated exceptions (such as WH-questions), any single accent in a sentence is necessarily a focus accent. The accent in (32a) is therefore a focus accent.

<sup>7</sup> The status of (2'b) and (3'b), in which the *comme*-N constituent appears in TOP position, is not entirely clear to me (native speaker judgments have proven inconclusive). It would be a priori surprising if an element which is licensed in A-TOP position would not also be licensed in TOP position, although there are items that may only occur in TOP and not in A-TOP position, such as the English topic-announcing phrase [*as for NP*] and its French equivalent [*quant à NP*].

<sup>8</sup> The pragmatic ambiguity of (5), especially that of the English gloss, raises the difficult issue of the 'projection' of the focus over sentence constituents larger than the one carrying the accent (Höhle 1982, Selkirk 1984: Ch. 5, Lambrecht 1994: Ch. 5). The sentence *That's an interesting BOOK* can be felicitously uttered even in a context in which the given book has just been mentioned in the conversation, contradicting the narrow iconic view of focus prosody (as defended e.g. in Chafe 1987) whereby any constituent with a recently activated denotatum must remain unaccented unless used 'contrastively'.

<sup>9</sup> The representation used here is that proposed in Ch. 5 of Lambrecht 1994. It is based on the definition of 'focus' as "the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition"

(ibidem). In terms of the taxonomy of focus types postulated there, both the PFCN construction and its canonical SVP equivalent have 'predicate-focus' structure.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the topicality presupposition in (ii) is not entailed by the activeness presupposition in (i). An entity may be active in the discourse without having a topic relation to the proposition (see Lambrecht 1994: Section 3.5).

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