Un étrange cas d'ellipse, mais pas que: diagnosing a new elliptical construction in French

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1 Introduction

Colloquial French makes a productive use of a controversed construction, *mais pas que*, which can be litteraly paraphrased as 'but not only'. *Mais pas que* (henceforth MPQ) is increasingly used in different registers, as the following show:

(1) a. Paris: les candidats planchent sur les Champs-Élysées, mais pas que...
'Paris: candidates are brainstorming at the *Champs-Élysées*, MPQ...' *Le Point*

b. François Hollande: «renforcer la mixité sociale» par le logement, mais pas que...
'François Hollande: to strenghten social diversity, MPQ...' *Le Moniteur*

c. Je suis prêt à vous aider, mais pas que.
'I'm ready to help you, MPQ' *Académie française*

d. Promis juré, les frites McDo sont faites avec des pommes de terre (mais pas que).
'Cross my heart, McDonald's French fries are made with potatoes (MPQ)' *Terraeco.net*

Intuitively, MPQ is kind of exceptive construction: it is used to evoke alternatives introduced by its antecedent, which are then left unsaid. Accordingly, (1d) above suggests that some ingredients other than potatoes enter the composition of fries at McDonald's. This construction is peculiar for many reasons: for instance, French *que* cannot normally appear alone at the end of a sentence, be it as an exceptive, as a comparative marker, or as a relative pronoun, suggesting that MPQ is an elliptical construction.

(2) a. *Les frites McDo (ne) sont faites que. *Exceptive*

b. *J'ai mangé plus de frites que. *Comparative marker*

c. *J'ai aimé les frites que. *Relative pronoun*

While the syntax and semantics of French *ne...que* exceptives have been discussed in detail (Azoulay-Vicente 1988; Dekydtspotter 1993; Gaatone 1999; O'Neill 2011; Homer 2015 i.a.), it seems that MPQ has still not received attention from linguists. In this work, we would like to propose an account of the semantics of MPQ, which treats it as an elliptical construction, used in order to re-introduce alternatives previously negated by a silent exhaustification operator EXH (Spector 2006; Fox 2007; Chierchia et al. 2012 and much subsequent literature), which the overt *que*, one of the French counterparts of *only*, is anaphoric to. Our proposal has various consequences, notably for i) the analysis of French exceptive form *que*, ii) the conditions on ellipsis licensing, and iii) the diagnosis of silent exhaustification processes at play in natural language.

2 MPQ is elliptical

That MPQ constructions involve ellipsis is suggested by the following. Contrary to MPQ which is introduced by contrastive '*mais*' 'but', ellipsis is infelicitous with the minimal variant involving '*et*' 'and',

(3a). However, adding an anaphoric demonstrative *ça* 'that' in (3b) rescues the sentence, illustrating the traditional contrast between ellipsis/'surface anaphora' and 'deep anaphora' (Hankamer & Sag, 1976).

(3) a. *Les frites McDo sont faites avec des pommes de terre, et que ⟨avec des pommes de terre⟩.
Intended:'McDonald's French fries are made with potatoes, and only ⟨with potatoes⟩.'

b. Les frites McDo sont faites avec des pommes de terre, et que ça.
'McDonald's French fries are made with potatoes, and only with this.'

Since contrast is a requirement for ellipsis to be licensed (Rooth 1992; Stockwell 2022), the infelicity of (3a) strongly suggests that ellipsis is at stake in MPQ constructions, which contain negation. But what kind of ellipsis is this? MPQ can target various constituents, as illustrated in (1a)-(1d); interestingly, the set of possible elided constituents of MPQ is the same set that usually associates with sentence-final adverb *seulement/uniquement* 'only' in French, suggesting that this is a case of VP-ellipsis:

(4) a. Je suis prêt à vous aider, mais pas seulement (=(1c))

b. Promis juré, les frites McDo sont faites avec des pommes de terre (mais pas seulement) (=(1d))

That we are in presence of VP-ellipsis, and not some other type such as NP-ellipsis, is corroborated by the fact that MPQ cannot be substituted by *seul*, which is adjectival 'only' in French:

(5) a. *Des frites, mais pas seules.
Intended: 'Fries, but not only ⟨fries⟩.'

b. *Un burger, mais pas seul.
Intended: 'A burger, but not only ⟨a burger⟩.'

3 *Que* in MPQ is a focus-sensitive operator

The fact that *que* can have multiple uses in French has spawned a great deal of debate, especially about its syntactic status in exceptives - it has been claimed to be a preposition (Azoulay-Vicente, 1988), an adverb (Gaatone, 1999), and a complementizer (O'Neill, 2011). While we do not want to enter this debate, it seems that ellipsis diagnostics provide arguments for treating *que* as a counterpart of adverbial *seulement* 'only'. We therefore analyze *que* as an operator taking sentential scope, presupposing its prejacent and asserting that the relevant, innocently excludable alternatives A_{IE} are false (Fox, 2007).

(6) $[\![\text{que}]\!] = \lambda A.\lambda p.\lambda w : p(w) = 1.\forall q[q \in A_{IE}(p,A) \rightarrow q(w) = 0]$

However, the behavior of French *que* contrasts with that of *only*, which is unable to associate with elided constituents (Beaver & Clark 2009, Bassi et al. 2022):

(7) *Kim only SALUTES because Sandy only does. (*intended:* 'Kim salutes (and does nothing else) because Sandy salutes (and does nothing else).') (Beaver & Clark, 2009, (7.52b))

Nevertheless, as evidenced by MPQ, this association seems felicitous in French.

4 Towards an analysis: contrast via exhaustification

We saw above that ellipsis is licensed by MPQs but not by structures such as (3a), because the latter does not provide proper contrast. But why is that so? Assuming that ellipsis requires some form of parallelism (Sag 1976; Rooth 1992 i.a.), (3a) should be fine, since both the elided sentence and its antecedent are different - the latter does not contain *que*. However, ellipsis is still unfelicitous in the absence of negation, suggesting that the presence of *que* alone is not enough to license it. In order to solve this puzzle, we propose that *que* is actually anaphoric to another, similar element in the antecedent clause - a silent exhaustification operator EXH (Spector 2006; Fox 2007, Magri 2009, 2011; Chierchia et al. 2012 i.a.). Since ellipsis is by and large an anaphoric phenomenon (Hardt 1993; Kehler 2000; Poppels 2022), this explains why negation is needed in order for the proper contrast to obtrain. What happens is that MPQ targets the obligatory implicature obtained through exhaustification of the antecedent, as in (8b):

(8) a. $[\![\text{EXH}]\!] = \lambda A.\lambda p.\lambda w \iff p(w) \wedge \forall q[q \in A_{IE}(p,A) \rightarrow \neg q(w)]$

b. $[\![\text{EXH Les frites McDo sont faites avec des PDT}_{\phi}]\!] = 1 \iff [\![\phi]\!] = 1 \wedge \forall \psi \in A_{IE}(\phi), [\![\psi]\!] = 0$

c. $A_{IE}(\phi) = \begin{cases} \text{McDo fries are made with carrots,} \\ \text{McDo fries are made with plastic,} \\ \text{McDo fries are made with leftovers...} \end{cases}$

What happens then is that MPQ can attach to this exhaustified sentence in order to cancel the implicature just generated, reintroducing negated alternatives through the negative component of MPQ:

(9) a. EXH [Les frites McDo sont faites avec des PDT], MPQ ⟨ avec des PDT ⟩

b. $[\![\text{EXH [Les frites McDo sont faites avec des PDT]}_{\phi}, \text{MPQ ⟨ avec des PDT ⟩}]\!] = 1 \iff [\![\phi]\!] = 1 \wedge \neg[\forall \psi \in A_{IE}(\phi), [\![\psi]\!] = 0] \equiv [\![\phi]\!] = 1 \wedge \exists \psi \in A_{IE}(\phi), [\![\psi]\!] = 1$

Therefore, The MPQ construction is true iff there is at least one alternative to its prejacent that is true in the context, which seems to capture the intended meaning. This brings MPQ very close to additive particles such as *too*, which occur in very similar environments, as the stripping example (10) shows:

(10) Les FMcD sont faites avec des PdT, et celles du Burger King ⟨sont faites avec des PdT⟩ *(aussi)
'McDo fries are made with potatoes, and BK ones are ⟨made with potatoes⟩, *(too).

In cases of stripping (and VP-ellipsis in English), *aussi* 'too' is mandatory. As convincingly argued by Bade (2014), additive particles are also assumed to closely interact with EXH and the mandatory implicature it triggers; assuming that both the antecedent and the remnant in (10) are exhaustified, leaving out *too* in (10) would result in a contradiction - namely, that both McDonald's and Burger King fries are each the only product made with potatoes. Adding *too* explicitly cancels this implicature, asserting the existence of at least one relevant alternative in the context:

(11) a. $[\![\phi \text{ too}]\!]^C = 1 \iff [\![\phi]\!] = 1 \wedge \exists \psi[\psi \in C \wedge [\![\psi]\!] = 1 \wedge \phi \neq \psi]$

b. EXH [Les frites McDo sont faites avec des pommes de terre], et EXH[celles du Burger King ⟨sont faites avec des PDT⟩ *(aussi)]]

Thus, MPQ acts as the mirror image of *aussi*, sharing essentially the same function: that of cancelling the generation of an otherwise obligatory implicature triggered by EXH. But while *aussi* does so by

means of the presupposition it lexically encodes, MPQ does so *via* negation, which targets an elided constituent headed by *que*, an overt counterpart of EXH in French.

5 Conclusion

MPQ constructions in French are a window into at least two crucial phenomena in natural language: ellipsis and exhaustification. First, MPQ is evidence that VP-ellipsis is possible in French, *contra* what is commonly assumed (Dagnac, 2019); second, assuming as we did that overt *que* in MPQ is actually anaphoric (through ellipsis) to its covert counterpart EXH in the antecedent, it provides support for the *only*-implicature generalization outlined in Fox (2007) and Asherov et al. (2022).

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