

Verb-Subject Order in Canadian French: An Experimental Study

French is canonically an SVO language, but VS order is possible in certain syntactic contexts (arguably particularly in a written, formal register). The first of such contexts involves questions and other extraction contexts (such as clefts and relative clauses). In those cases, VS order is referred to as *stylistic inversion* (1) (e.g. Kayne and Pollock 1978):

- (1) a. *Quand est-ce que ton ami est parti?* b. *Quand est parti ton ami?*
when is.it that your friend AUX left when AUX left your friend
'When did your friend leave?'

A second context, called *unaccusative VS* (2), occurs in several types of non-extraction contexts, including subjunctive clauses, within time adverbials, and following temporal adverbs (2):

- (2) a. *Le silence se fit. Alors deux hommes sont entrés.*
the silence REFL made then two men AUX entered
b. *Le silence se fit. Alors sont entrés deux hommes.*
the silence REFL made then AUX entered two men
'Silence fell. Then two men entered.'
(Marandin 2001:195)

A third context involves inversion with heavy NP subjects (3):

- (3) a. *Les députés de la majorité ainsi que les non-inscrits ont accepté notre proposition.*
the MPs of the majority as.well as the unregistered AUX accepted our proposal
b. *Ont accepté notre proposition les députés de la majorité ainsi que les non-inscrits.*
AUX accepted our proposal the MPs of the majority as.well as the unregistered
'The MPs of the majority as well as the nonregistered ones have accepted our proposal.'
(Bonami et al. 1999:21)

In general, stylistic inversion and unaccusative VS have been analyzed as different phenomena, but Lahousse (2006) argues that the two are examples of the same phenomenon, *genuine inversion*, while heavy subject NP inversion is a separate phenomenon, *focus inversion*. Lahousse also argues that heavy subject NP inversion forces an exhaustive reading of the subject. However, to the best of our knowledge there is no experimental literature on the grammatical status of VS order in French, and very little literature of any kind on VS order in Canadian French. We present results from an experiment testing the status of the various contexts for VS order in Canadian French, in order to shed light on theoretical questions about the status of the three different types of VS order listed above in this dialect of French.

A group of native Canadian French speakers (n=54) participated in a written experiment in which they were presented with written sentences in Canadian French and asked to judge their naturalness on a 5-point Likert scale. The first task was a grammaticality judgment task (GT) in which sentences were presented without a discourse context, and the second task was a context-driven grammaticality judgment (CGT) task in which sentences were presented in a discourse context. The stimuli included sentences in all the aforementioned contexts (n=30 in the GT, n=35 in the CGT), as well as unrelated distractors (n=24 in the GT, n=24 in the CGT). *Wh*-questions like (1) were used for the stylistic inversion conditions, while temporal adverb contexts like (2) were used for the unaccusative VS conditions. Subjects also took a French proficiency test (mean score = 46/50, range = 39-50) and a language background questionnaire.

The results of the GJ indicate that VS order is generally disfavored relative to SV order, even in a written register. Subjects rated sentences with VS order significantly lower than their SV counterparts, except in the case of stylistic inversion, where there was no significant difference ($p = .75$). In addition, Stylistic inversion sentences were rated significantly more acceptable than VS sentences in unaccusative and heavy subject NP conditions ($p < .0001$ in both cases). In particular, the fact that stylistic inversion

was rated significantly higher than unaccusative VS provides evidence in favor of the analysis of stylistic inversion and unaccusative VS as different phenomena, contra Lahousse.

According to this analysis (e.g. Bonami et al. 1999, Marandin 2001), stylistic inversion can occur with all types of verbs, while unaccusative VS can only occur with passives and unaccusative verbs; in addition, *en*-pronominalization is argued to be possible with unaccusative VS but impossible with stylistic inversion. Such arguments motivate a syntactic distinction between stylistic inversion and unaccusative VS. The results of the present study effectively support such a distinction between the two, at least in Canadian French. Whereas stylistic inversion has been analyzed in terms of movement – e.g. Kayne and Pollock (2001) argue that the subject moves from the TP to the left periphery, and then the TP containing just the VP remnant moves to a higher position in the left periphery – Marandin (2001) argues that the subject in unaccusative VS is realized as an object, so no movement is necessary to explain the VS order.

Heavy subject NP inversion has been less studied in French (but see Bonami et al. 1999). We included two experimental conditions with the aim of testing Lahousse's hypothesis that heavy subject NP inversion forces an exhaustive reading of the subject. In these conditions, an inversion sentence was followed by a sentence either compatible or incompatible with an exhaustive reading of the subject:

- (4) *Se sont qualifiés pour le championnat Jean et Marie.*
REFL AUX qualified for the championship Jean and Marie.
'Jean and Marie qualified for the championship.'
a. ... *Les autres participants ont échoué.* (exhaustive context)
the other participants AUX failed
'...The other participants failed.'
b. ... *En outre, Madeleine s'est qualifiée.* (non-exhaustive context)
in addition Madeleine REFL AUX qualified
'...Madeleine qualified as well.'

Heavy subject NP inversion sentences whose continuation was compatible with an exhaustive interpretation of the subject were rated significantly higher than those whose continuation was incompatible with an exhaustive interpretation of the subject ($p < .0001$). This provides support for the claim that heavy subject NP inversion forces an exhaustive reading of the subject.

Overall, our results provide evidence that, at least in Canadian French, stylistic inversion should be treated as a separate phenomenon from both unaccusative VS and heavy subject NP inversion, motivating a separate syntactic analysis for stylistic inversion. It remains an open question whether unaccusative VS and heavy subject NP inversion should also be treated as different from each other; there was no significant difference in the ratings of the sentences in the two conditions ($p = .20$). However, our results do show that any analysis of heavy subject NP inversion has to account for the fact that an exhaustive reading of the subject is strongly favored (which has not been argued to be the case for unaccusative VS). These results contribute to the literature by bringing to bear experimental methods on the syntax of Canadian French, to investigate a topic which has typically only been investigated theoretically and with regard to European French.

Selected references: Bonami, O., Godard, D., and Marandin, J.-M. 1999. Constituency and word order in French subject inversion. In Bouma et al. (eds.), *Constraints and Resources in Natural Language Syntax and Semantics*, 21-40. Stanford: CSLI. · Kayne, R. and Pollock, J.-Y. 1978. Stylistic inversion, successive cyclicity and move NP in French. *Linguistic Inquiry* 9:595-621. · Lahousse, K. 2006. NP subject inversion in French: two types, two configurations. *Lingua* 116:424-461. · Marandin, J.-M. 2001. Unaccusative inversion in French. In D'Hulst et al. (eds.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 1999*, 195-222. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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