

# Syntactic variation and diglossia in French<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The present article addresses syntactic variation within French, and is an example of a relatively recent shift in attitude towards variation in this language. It considers the status of the variation with respect to the mental grammars of speakers, in particular in the light of Massot's work suggesting that contemporary metropolitan France is characterised by diglossia, that is, a community of speakers with two (in this case massively overlapping but not entirely identical) 'French' grammars which co-exist in their minds, one stylistically marked High, the other Low. The article reviews one particular instance of variation and argues that Massot's model needs to be revised in order to account for the particular phenomenon of surface forms which can be generated by both putative grammars but which have a different linguistic status in each.

**Keywords:** *French, syntax, variation, diglossia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in recent years in the study of language variation and change. In the context of French it was once a commonplace to claim that there had been no significant syntactic change since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and that the label 'Modern French' reflected a three-century-long period of grammatical stability (Rowlett 2007:9). According to Gadet's (2009) survey of work in the area, this is at least in part due to the 'ideology of the standard' (Milroy and Milroy 1985) which surrounds the French (of France), and, relatedly, to the fact that the use of linguistic corpora, especially in relation to the spoken language, developed later for French than, for example, English or Italian.<sup>2</sup> The relatively recent interest in syntactic variation within specifically spoken French is very closely associated with the work of the late Claire Blanche-Benveniste's *Groupe aixois de recherches en syntaxe* (GARS) at the University of Provence which has looked at VP-related valency variation (micro-syntax) and CP-related discourse/pragmatic variation (macro-syntax), and has even placed a question mark over the status of the sentence as the fundamental unit of syntactic description. Work on syntactic variation has now broadened out beyond narrow normative written French and takes in: (i) social/stylistic variation within France (Armstrong 2001; Blanche-Benveniste with Martin 2010); (ii) French in contact situations (Spaëtt ed. 2010); (iii) diatopic variation outside France, including comparison with 'le français de référence' and across 'non-standard' varieties (Gadet and Jones 2008); and, more recently still, (iv) French as used in online environments (van Compernelle 2008; Damar 2008). Gadet (2009:118) concludes from her survey that 'we have [...] arrived at a very exciting

moment in the study of French syntax'. Some of that excitement is reflected in a recent issue of *Langue française* on the topic of 'Le(s) Français: formaliser la variation' (Barra-Joven ed. 2010).

The article is organised as follows: section two illustrates syntactic variation in French and the 'variationist' approach to it; section three sets out an alternative account based on the notion of diglossia (Massot 2008); section four demonstrates how one particular surface form can have two distinct sets of properties in the two putative grammars; section five explores the nature of the relationship between Massot's two grammars; and section six contains some concluding remarks.

## 2. SYNTACTIC VARIATION IN FRENCH

Syntactic variation in the French of contemporary France is the subject of a 2008 Paris 8 PhD thesis by Benjamin Massot (building in a 2003 DEA dissertation). Massot catalogues a number of familiar areas of syntactic variation in French. First, the preverbal negative marker *ne* co-exists with a null variant  $\emptyset$ :

- (1) a. Jean ne vient pas.                      b.     Jean  $\emptyset$  vient pas.  
      J. NEG comes not                        J. comes not  
      a, b: 'John's not coming.'

Second, topical subjects can, but do not have to, be clitic left dislocated:

- (2) a. Jean arrive demain.                      b.     Jean, il arrive demain.  
      J. arrives tomorrow                      J. he arrives tomorrow  
      a, b: 'John's arriving tomorrow.'

Third, non-presuppositional yes–no interrogatives either display 'inversion'<sup>3</sup> of the main verb or the use of the interrogative marker *est-ce que* 'is it that':

- (3) a. Est-il parti?                                b.     Est-ce qu'il est parti?  
      Is-he left                                    is-it that-he is left  
      a, b: 'Has he left?'

Fourth, exclamatives can be marked by *(Ah) que . . . !* or *Qu'est-ce que . . . !*:

- (4) a. (Ah) que tu es belle!                      b.     Qu'est-ce que tu es belle!  
      oh that you are beautiful                what-is-it that you are beautiful  
      a, b: 'My, how beautiful you are!'

Fifth, the second-person plural subject proform *nous* 'we' alternates with *on* 'one':

- (5) a. Nous allons partir.                      b.    On va partir.  
      we go leave                                one goes leave  
      a, b: 'We're going to leave.'

Finally, in a number of specific (non-adjectival) contexts there is variation as to whether past participles show overt agreement for gender and number with a preceding direct object:

- (6) a. les lettres que j'ai écrites [ekrit]      b. les lettres que j'ai écrit [ekri]  
      the letters that I-have written-AGR      the letters that I-have written  
      a, b: 'the letters I wrote'

Uncontroversially, Massot (2008) notes that, in terms of sociolinguistic status, the variation illustrated in (1)–(6) is not free. Rather, in each case the (a) and (b) variants have clearly marked and contrasting stylistic profiles: the (a) examples are high status (H), while the (b) ones are low status (L). Further, given the absence of any immediately obvious *unmarked* (= both H *and* L) alternative, speakers using these structures have no option other than to adopt an overtly H or L style. This contrasts with the situation illustrated in (7) and (8), where in (7) the unmarked variant in (7a) alternates with a marked H variant in (7b), and in (8) the unmarked variant in (8a) alternatives with a marked L variant in (8b).

- (7) a. Si elle avait pu . . .                      b.    Si elle eût pu . . .  
      if she have.IMP known                      if she have.IMP.SUB  
      UNMARKED: H AND L                      MARKED: H  
      a, b: 'If she had been able to, . . . '
- (8) a. Si elle avait su . . .                      b.    Si elle aurait su . . .  
      if she have.IMP known                      if she have.COND known  
      UNMARKED: H AND L                      MARKED: L  
      a, b: 'If she had known, . . . '

Massot (2008) has a particular interest in the data in (1)–(8), namely the issue of how the attested variation is related to the grammar encoded in speakers' minds. According to one model, which might be labelled variationist, speakers have access to a single grammar which internally accounts for the attested variation: a number of loci of variation are embedded within the grammar, and for each one speakers make a choice on the hoof as to which (stylistically marked or genuinely free) available variant to use in a particular utterance. Such an approach predicts that all logically possible combinations of variants are in principle available, and, in the case of the variation illustrated in (1)–(6), that speakers can freely combine marked H and marked L variants. Significantly, though, Massot shows that free co-occurrence of

variants is not found. For example, with respect to the variation illustrated in (2) and (5) above, the variationist approach predicts that all four logical combinations of no dislocation (H) versus dislocation (L), and of *nous* 'we' (H) versus *on* 'one' (L), should be attested. Yet, they are not, as shown by the judgements in (9):

- |     |  |   |
|-----|--|---|
| (9) | a. <i>Nous</i> allons à la mer.<br>we go to the sea              | b. ??* <i>On</i> va à la mer. <sup>4</sup><br>one goes to the sea |
|     | c. ??* <i>Nous, nous</i> allons à la mer.<br>we we go to the sea | d. <i>Nous, on</i> va à la mer.<br>we one goes to the sea         |

a–d: 'We're going to the seaside.'

While the grammatical (9a) illustrates the choice of two H options (no dislocation and *nous* 'we') and (9d) the choice of two L options (dislocation and *on* 'one'), the ungrammatical (9b, c) represent the selection of two mismatching options, one H and one L in each case. This pattern of (un)grammaticality (or at least unacceptability) is not expected within the variationist model of variant selection within a single grammar, and Massot therefore rejects that model.

### 3. FRANCE AS DIGLOSSIC

As an alternative to the variationist approach based on choices available within a *single* grammar Massot (2008) suggests that the attested variation is a reflection of the fact that individual speakers have access to two *distinct* 'French' grammars, one of which is sociolinguistically/stylistically marked L, while the other is marked H. The data in (9) are therefore captured by one lexical and one grammatical difference between FCT and FD. The two varieties differ lexically in having either *nous* or *on* as 2PL subject proform, both of which are compatible with a topic feature. The two varieties differ syntactically in that topicalised subjects in FD (but not FCT) trigger dislocation.

Various labels have been used in the literature to characterise these grammars/varieties, for example, *le français avancé* 'advanced French', *le néo-français* 'neo-French', *colloquial French* or *contemporary French* (L) contrasting with *written French* or *modern French* (H). Massot (2008) settles on the terms *français démotique* (FD) 'French of the people' for the L grammar<sup>5</sup>, and *français classique tardif* (FCT) 'late classical French' for the H variety. FD corresponds to an innovative but socially stigmatised vernacular acquired early in the naturalistic setting of the home and in which the speaker has a stable competence which might be described as that of a native speaker. FCT corresponds to a conservative and more prestigious variety learnt later, under the influence of schooling and the normative tradition, and not necessarily to the same degree of competence/stability, and hence characterised

by uncertainty (e.g., *le fait que* 'the fact that . . . ' followed by IND rather than standard SUB) and hypercorrection (e.g., *après que* 'after . . . ' followed by SUB rather than standard IND).

For Massot FD and FCT co-exist in each speaker's mind as two distinct grammars. As we have seen, there is overlap (extensive but not total) between FD and FCT, and so some surface forms will be generated by both grammars and have the same status in each: such areas of overlap, such as those in (7a) and (8a), will be sociolinguistically/stylistically unmarked (*both H and L*); forms generated by FCT but not FD, such as those illustrated in (1a)–(6a) and (7b), will be prestigious, valued, normative (H); forms generated by FD but not FCT, such as those illustrated in (1b)–(6b) and (8b), will be stigmatised, non-normative (L).

Massot's account of the judgements in (9a–d) is based on the notion that — however close or divergent the grammars available to a speaker might be — only one can be accessed at any one time, and the choice of grammar which the speaker makes will be made on the basis of a sociolinguistic assessment of the context. For our purposes, the model explains why, within the relevant utterance unit, a speaker is unable to combine uniquely FD features with uniquely FCT features.

#### 4. ONE SURFACE FORM, TWO GRAMMATICAL STATUSES

So far, a surface form generated by both FCT and FD (and therefore stylistically/sociolinguistically unmarked) is assumed to have the same grammatical status in the two grammars. This is true of the structures illustrated (7a) and (8a). In this section I explore the possibility of *one and the same* surface form having a quite *different* grammatical status in FCT and FD. One surface form to which this might apply is *est-ce que/qui* 'is it that',<sup>6</sup> found in interrogative sentences. Diachronically, *est-ce que/qui* is transparently the output of an overt (and presumably genuine — see endnote 2) syntactic inversion process which has applied to *c'est que/qui* 'it is that', a cleft structure marking pragmatic focus. Synchronically, things are not so straightforward. *Est-ce que/qui* is found in both FCT and FD, and in that sense might a priori be thought of along the same lines as (7a) and (8a). These can also be generated by both grammars, and there is every reason to believe that they have the same grammatical status in each one. This is also Massot's approach to *est-ce que/qui* (see Massot 2010, Fig. 1). Yet for *est-ce que/qui* the approach is problematic. The problem does not lie so much within FCT: since this grammar is known to retain 'inversion' (albeit not true inversion; see (3a) and endnote 2), we can assume that *est-ce que/qui* in FCT is an instance of an 'inverted' cleft. Rather, the problem lies within FD: FD has not retained 'inversion', and in fact *est-ce que/qui* is presented in (3b) as the FD *alternative* to the 'inverted' FCT form. *Est-ce que/qui* is therefore deemed to have a different grammatical status in FD to the one it has in FCT. In Rowlett (2007) I adopt an analysis of *est-ce que/qui* in FD as a grammaticalised complementiser drawn from the lexicon ready made and merged

directly in a head position within the left clause periphery, *without* marking pragmatic focus. Thus, unlike Massot's (2010) approach, in which *est-ce que* has the same syntactic and, presumably therefore, also pragmatic status in both FCT and FD, two distinct analyses are posited for *est-ce que* which differ both syntactically (result of 'inversion' (FCT) or atomic complementiser (FD)?) and pragmatically (focus-cleft (FCT) or not focus-cleft (FD)?):

- (10) a. Est-ce que tu pars? 'Are you leaving?' in FCT is: biclausal; the consequence of the Q feature being merged on I\*° in the matrix clause; an inverted cleft expressing pragmatic focus.  
 b. Est-ce que tu pars? 'Are you leaving?' in FD is: monoclausal; the consequence of the Q feature being merged on C\*°; not therefore inverted; not therefore expressing pragmatic focus.

The interaction between these two dimensions of variation is illustrated in (11) in the context of the question 'Who can you see?' (Rowlett 2007:210).

	FCT ([Q] on I*°)	FD ([Q] on C*°)
Non-cleft	Qui vois-tu?	Qui [Ø] tu vois? Qui [que] tu vois? <i>Qui [est-ce que] tu vois?</i> <u>Qui [c'est que] tu vois?</u>
Cleft	<i>Qui est-ce que tu vois?</i>	<u>Qui [Ø] c'est que tu vois?</u> Qui [que] c'est que tu vois? Qui [est-ce que] c'est que tu vois? Qui [c'est que] c'est que tu vois?

*Qui est-ce que tu vois?* 'Who can you see?' appears twice in (11) (italicised): bottom left it is generated by the FCT grammar within an inverted cleft with wh fronting; top right it is generated by the FD grammar within an uninverted non-clefted with wh fronting and the atomic complementiser *est-ce que* drawn straight from lexicon. The question has a different pragmatic status depending on which grammar generated it.<sup>7</sup> The two analyses of *est-ce que/qui*, one for FCT on the basis of syntactic 'inversion', another for FD without such a device, address several issues and these are set out in the following sections. The issues relate to double clefting, tense marking, 'inversion' in subordinate interrogatives and the parallel between *est-ce que* and *si* 'if'. In each case, it is shown how the data could not be captured if it were

assumed that the same surface form were deemed to have the same grammatical status in FCT and FD.

#### 4.1 Double clefting

Consider the examples in (12) and (13), generated by the FD grammar, and taken from the bottom right-hand corner cell in the table in (11):

- (12) Qui est-ce que c'est que tu vois?  
who is-it that it-is that you saw  
'Who can you see?'
- (13) Qui c'est que c'est que tu vois?  
who it-is that it-is that you saw  
= (12)

If *est-ce que* in (12) were the result of 'inversion' in FD, as it is in FCT, then this example would be derived from the uninverted (and non-wh-fronted) structure in (14):

- (14) C'est qui que c'est que tu vois?

This is problematic since the prospective underlying structure in (14) (without 'inversion') is characterised by two instances of clefting, a feature which is hard to motivate on pragmatic grounds. The same is also clearly true of (13). If, in contrast, and as suggested here, *c'est/est-ce que/qui* is generated within the FD grammar as an atomic complementiser drawn directly from the lexicon, without the pragmatic force of a cleft, then there is no need to derive (12)/(13) from (14). Examples (12)/(13) are single, pragmatically motivated cleft sentences containing a formally complex, but syntactically atomic, complementiser.

#### 4.2 Tense marking

The two analyses of *est-ce que/qui*, one within FCT and another within FD, make contrasting predictions in respect of tense marking. In FCT *est-ce que/qui* is an inverted cleft, and *est* a regular finite verb. As such, tense variation is expected to be found, with sequence-of-tense implications, as in (15):

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| (15) a. Qui était-ce que tu voyais? (Imperfect) | (FCT) |
| b. Qui sera-ce que tu verras? (Future)          | (FCT) |
| c. Qui serait-ce que tu verrais? (Conditional)  | (FCT) |
| d. Qui fut-ce que tu vis? (Past-historic)       | (FCT) |

While anything other than the default present indicative is admittedly rare in clefts, the following are attested examples found online:

- (16) a. Quand sera-ce que nous serons petits? (Future) (FCT)  
when will.be-it that we will.be small  
'When shall we be small?'
- b. Qui était-ce qui avait préparé . . . ? (Imperfect) (FCT)  
who was-it that had prepared  
'Who had prepared . . . ?'
- c. Pourquoi fut-ce que les Romains firent telle chose? (Past-historic) (FCT)  
why was-it that the Romans did such thing  
'Why did the Romans do such a thing?'

As expected given their FCT origin, the examples in (16) are stylistically marked as H (in addition to expressing pragmatic focus). In FD *est-ce que/qui* is an atomic complementiser drawn ready made from lexicon; it does not express pragmatic focus; it does not contain a finite verb, and so tense-related variant forms are not expected. In other words, not only are the examples in (16) expected to be stylistically marked as H, the FD 'equivalents' are expected to retain *est-ce que/qui*, irrespective of the tense of the lexical verb, and are not expected to express focus, as in (17):

- (17) a. Quand est-ce que nous serons petits? (FD)  
when is-it that we will.be small  
= (16a)
- b. Qui est-ce qui avait préparé . . . ? (FD)  
who is-it that had prepared  
= (16b)
- c. ??Pourquoi est-ce que les Romains firent telle chose? (FD<sup>8</sup>)  
why is-it that the Romans did such thing  
= (16c)

### 4.3 'Inversion' in subordinate interrogatives

The dual analysis of *est-ce que/qui* explains the mystery of the contrast in (18) (from Jones 1999):

- (18) a. \*Je me demande quand arrivera-t-il. (FD/FCT)  
I me ask when will.arrive-it



- b. Je me demande quand est-ce que le train arrivera. (FD/\*FCT)  
I me ask when is-it that the train will arrive  
'I wonder when the train will arrive.'

Example (18a) shows that 'inversion' is impossible in subordinate interrogatives, in FCT and FD alike. This has been accounted for theoretically by claiming that, in both grammars of French (as indeed in English), in selected interrogative contexts like indirect questions the crucial Q feature is merged high in the left periphery, that is, higher than in matrix interrogatives, and 'inversion' is therefore unmotivated. On that basis, the grammaticality in FD (but not FCT) of (18b), containing *est-ce que/qui*, is possibly unexpected. Crucially, though, the grammaticality of (18b) is unexpected if *est-ce que/qui* reflects 'inversion' in FD as it does in FCT. However, if as suggested here FD is not characterised by 'inversion' and if *est-ce que/qui* in FD is instead an atomic complementiser drawn directly from the lexicon rather than being the output of 'inversion', then nothing more needs to be said: 'inversion' in (18a) is ungrammatical for both grammars because Q is merged high in subordinate interrogatives; in contrast, *est-ce que* in (18b) is grammatical (in FD) because it is not generated by 'inversion' but is instead one of several available lexical realisations of the interrogative complementiser (alongside  $\emptyset$ , *que* and *c'est que*):

- (19) a. Je me demande quand  $\emptyset$  le train arrivera. (FD/FCT)  
b. Je me demande quand que le train arrivera. (FD)  
c. Je me demande quand c'est que le train arrivera. (FD)  
a-c: = (18b)

#### 4.4 'Est-ce que' vs. 'si'

Finally, the claim that *est-ce que/qui* functions in FD as an atomic complementiser, rather than as the output of 'inversion', explains the two ways in which it parallels *si* 'if'. The first is that *est-ce que/qui* is a direct FD equivalent of *si* 'if' as a marker of an indirect yes–no question, as in (20):

- (20) a. Il demande s'il pleut. b. Il demande est-ce qu'il pleut.  
he asks if-it rains (FCT) he asks is-it that it rains (FD)  
a, b: 'He wants to know whether it's raining.'

The second is illustrated in (21), which Goosse (2000:114) characterises as oral and regionally marked (hence FD in our terms).

- (21) [Est-ce que vous viendrez] ou [si c'est lui]? (FD)  
is-it that you will come or if it-is him  
'Will you come or will he?'

Assuming a parallel structure across the two conjuncts of the conjunction, *est-ce que* and *si* both appear to function as a complementiser introducing a matrix interrogative. Crucially, such a parallel analysis would not be possible if *est-ce que* were analysed here as the output of 'inversion'.

In short, therefore, there are at least four reasons not to conclude that the surface form *est-ce que/qui* has the same grammatical status in the two grammars which generate it. Massot's diglossic approach to syntactic variation in French consequently needs to be revised to allow this.

## 5 CHALLENGES

So far we have identified syntactic variation within modern French, rejected the variationist account of it on the grounds that it fails to explain why some combinations of variants are not attested, seen the diglossic approach as a potential alternative account, and added that the model needs to be flexible enough to allow, where appropriate, 'one' surface form to have distinct properties in the two posited grammars. In this session I consider some issues which emerge from this overall approach.

The first issue is the massive similarity between FD and FCT: The variationist account based on a single grammar does not have this problem. The two 'varieties' of French are as strikingly similar to one another as they are because they are generated by the same grammar. In the diglossic model the issue arises of why FD is not more dissimilar to FCT.

The second issue relates to the lexicon: A language can be conceived of as a lexicon and a grammar, 'words and rules' in Pinker's (1999) informal terms, and languages co-existing in familiar diglossic contexts each have their own words and their own rules. The fact that, in the diglossic account of French, the two grammars access one and the same lexicon is novel.

The third issue relates to the status of FCT: According to Ferguson (1959) diglossia amounts to the relatively stable co-existence of two varieties. Yet the characterisation of FCT above (late learning in an artificial environment, lesser degree of competence/stability, uncertainty, hypercorrection) places a question mark over whether FCT is psychologically real or coherent in the way FD is (Bauche 1926; Côté 1999).

The fourth issue concerns the nature of the relationship between the syntactic properties of FCT and those of FD: Massot makes clear that the FCT/FD distinction is not the same as the distinction between spoken and written language. Therefore, uniquely FD and uniquely FCT features appear in written and spoken language alike. There is nothing inherent in the properties of FCT or FD which predispose them to one particular channel, and neither is there anything particular about speech or writing which explains why certain grammatical features are characteristic of FD or FCT. In principle there is no reason to assume anything other than a random

relationship between the properties of two languages co-existing in a context of diglossia. Yet there is a sense in which the differences between FCT and FD can (all?) be characterised in parallel fashion. While not claiming that [FD] is a simplified version of [FCT], Gadet (1997) characterises [FD] in terms of a *séquence progressive*, fixed word order, analyticity, invariability. One is tempted to conclude that the two varieties/grammars represent an extended period of change in progress within the same language. The challenge, therefore, for anyone who remains sceptical about Massot's diglossic approach is one of finding a way of bringing the dimensions of FD–FCT variation together as reflecting not several but (ideally) just one single locus of grammatical difference, and of conceiving of that difference within a single grammar. This would be much tighter version of the variationist approach rejected by Massot (2008), but it would not have the crucial weakness Massot identified, and it would address the issues raised above. It is a challenge waiting to be taken up.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The starting point for the present article has been the acknowledgement, relatively recent in the context of French, that syntactic variation is a characteristic of the modern language, and not merely a distinction between the written and spoken media. I have focused on the issue of how the attested variation relates to the grammar encoded in speakers' minds. I outlined Massot's (2008) rejection of the variationist approach, based on the notion of a single mental grammar allowing internally for variation, on the grounds that it fails to account for the absence of the full range of logically possible combinations of variants, and his alternative approach based on the notion of diglossia, that is, speakers have two distinct mental grammars. By placing a wall between the two grammars, at least within the context of a single linguistic unit, which Massot claims is the sentence,<sup>9</sup> the diglossia approach accounts for the unattested variant combinations by attributing them to exclusive grammatical systems. However, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that Massot's model fails to recognise that one and the same surface form, such as *est-ce que/qui*, can be generated by two grammars and have a different syntactic status in each. Finally, I have identified some unanswered questions which Massot's approach raises, and identified the challenge which lies before us.

## NOTES

1. Acknowledgement: This article is based on a plenary lecture I delivered to the 19<sup>th</sup> Manchester–Salford Postgraduate Linguistics Conference, held at the University of Manchester in September 2010. I am grateful to the organisers of the conference for the invitation, to the audience for their engagement with my topic, and also to the

reviewers of this article for their detailed feedback on the original version of the manuscript.

Abbreviations used: NEG = negative marker; IND = indicative; SUB = subjunctive; COND = conditional; IMP = imperfect; Q = interrogative feature.

2. See Durand ed. (2008) for examples of recent work in French corpus linguistics.

3. For the modern language there are important reasons not to think of the phenomenon illustrated in (a) as inversion in the sense of movement of the finite verb to the left of the subject and out of the core clause. I therefore use scare quotes when referring to the phenomenon. See Rowlett (2007) for detailed discussion and alternative analysis, based on the idea that, unlike in English for example, where the presence of the Q feature on I\*° (understood as the highest inflectional head position within the core clause) triggers movement, for checking purposes, of the finite verb to C\*° (a head position within the left clause periphery), in French the Q feature on I\*° instead creates a representational chain with C\*°, one of the consequences of which is that the finite verb can remain in I\*° and appear with an 'agreement affix', the element traditionally analysed as (and doubtless historically derived from) the subject proform.

4. The grammaticality judgement in the text relates to the interpretation of the subject as topical, for example, as a contrastive topic. If the subject is non-topical, and the whole sentence is focal, then the utterance is grammatical. This reading and this judgement are irrelevant for my purposes.

5. Massot (2003) uses the term *français démotique contemporain*.

6. The difference between *que* and *qui* in this form is a long-standing issue in French syntax but tangential to my concerns here. I gloss them both as *that*.

7. The surface form *Qui c'est que tu vois?* 'Who can you see?' also appears twice in the table (see underlining), once top right, once bottom right, both generated by FD. In the first case *c'est que* is a complementiser within a non-cleft sentence; in the second case the complementiser is non-overt and *c'est que* marks a cleft.

8. The question-mark judgement against (c) reflects the stylistic mismatch between the use of the *est-ce que* complementiser (L) and the past-historic verb form (H).

9. This claim is significant, since *intra-sentential* (as opposed to *inter-sentential*) code-switching is well attested in the literature (see for example van Gelderen and MacSwan 2008).

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