The Pronominal Left Detachment Moi Je in Spoken European French: A Constructionist Approach

Karin Ewert-Kling[a],*

[a]University of Düsseldorf , Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany.
* Corresponding author.

Abstract

Construction Grammar is a theory which has not yet been applied so far by Romance linguists concerning morphosyntactic *Left Detachment* constructions in spoken European French such as the pronominal Left Detachment *moi je*. This construction originally marking the topic of the sentence or the topic the discourse has different interactive pragmatic functions which will be shown and explained in detail by French corpus examples. After having explored the interactive functions of *moi je* we will explain in which communication contexts *moi je* has already reached a high degree of "entrenchment" (Croft, 2007, p.499) or so called "functional routinization" (Ewert-Kling 2012) in certain contexts.

Key words: Construction grammar; Constructionist approach; Certain contexts

1. LEFT DETACHMENT: FORMAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

Left Detachments (henceforth LDs) are morphosyntactically and pragmatically marked constructions which are mainly used in spontaneous spoken language (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher, ²2011, p.99). The LD-element can be for example a nominal phrase, a pronominal phrase or even a whole sentence and it occurs in sentence initial position. As it is followed by an already syntactically complete sentence, this element is considered as sentence initially "detached" (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.111).

The LD-element can fulfill different syntactic functions such as subject, object or prepositional object. Within the following main sentence, the LD-element is "doubled" (Barnes, 1985, p.1) by a congruent coreferential pronoun with the same syntactic function (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2011a, p.136). In the case of the construction *moi je,* the stressed subject pronoun *moi* is doubled within the main sentence by the unstressed subject pronoun *je.* As the English does not have stressed and unstressed pronouns, pronominal LDs (and Right Detachments, RDs) do not exist in English which makes the further translations of the French examples quite difficult[1].

The LD-referent has to be identifiable (which we abbreviate with the informational parameter [+IDENT]) for the percipient (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.112 & 2011a, p.136), which means that the percipient has to be able to identify the LD-referent. A referent is identifiable by the percipient in the following contexts (cf. Wehr, 2000, p.248; Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.80ss):

a) it is contained in the permanent repertoire which comprises the world knowledge and the knowledge of the "personal frame" (Lambrecht, 1995, p.90) of the interlocutor's private life.

b) it is identifiable by the communicative situation.

c) it has already been established or mentioned in the discourse (cf. Wehr, 2000, p.248 calls b) and c) the "temporary repertoire").

d) it can be derived by other discourse referents which are identifiable by the percipient.

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[1] The French construction *moi je* will be translated with the paraphrase *concerning myself* and/or with the stressed subject pronoun "*I* which does not have to be confused with the contrastive focus stress". For more detail see Gabriel (2007) and Ewert-Kling (2010, Chap. 3.4).

Concerning its first occurrence in the context, the LD-referent can either be mentioned before or it is mentioned for the first time in the discourse. In this case we use the parameter [+/- NEW] (cf. Wehr, 2000, p.248ss; Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.79). These parameters ([+/- IDENT] and [+/-NEW]), which are necessary to describe the informational status of the LD-element, are not considered as opposites to each other[2], but as parameters which complete each other because they refer to different discourse factors[3].

The following examples of the *Corpus de Référence du Français Parlé* (CRFP) will show how LDs in spoken French work syntactically:

(1)   […] *moi je* (S) suis à la retraite maintenant […] (CRFP, LIL-R00PRI001, p.6).
       engl. ***Concerning myself, I/ I*** am retired right now […].

(2)   […] *ma grand-mère elle* (S) ne savait pas – écrire – c'était une ancienne bergère […]. (CRFP, BAY-R00PRI002, S. p.2).
       engl. "**My grandmother she** didn't know how to – write – she was an old shepherdesse […]"

(3)   […] *les animaux* (DO) […] ça *les* perturbe pas […] (CRFP, LIM-R00PRI001, p.3).
       engl. "**The animals** that doesn't disturb **them** […]".

2. TOPIC: A DISCOURSE CATEGORY

A topic is defined pragmatically as a discourse category: it is the subject the emittent or speaker is talking about[4].

If the topic refers to just one sentence or just one utterance and is mentioned explicitly, it is called a "sentence topic" (ST). The topic which is coded as the subject is to be considered as morphosyntactically and pragmatically unmarked (cf. Reinhart, 1982, p.9). But a ST can also express other syntactic functions like direct or indirect objects. In this case, the ST can be marked by a detachment, e.g. *My new neighbour, do you know **him**?*

Concerning the discourse topic (DT), the topic is considered as a transphrastic category and it does not

have to be mentioned literally[5]. The topic neither has to be placed in a specific position[6] nor needs to express a specific pragmatic value.

Topics can for example either be [+IDENT] or [-IDENT]. [+IDENT] topics do not need to be introduced in the discourse because they are already identifiable by the percipient (cf. Chap.1). The fact that [-IDENT] topics are not identifiable by the percipient often leads to the scientific assumption that speakers cannot talk about [-IDENT] topics. We claim however that this assumption is wrong and that a topic can also be [-IDENT], e.g. in the utterance *When she was five years old, **a child of my acquaintance** announced the theory that she was inhabited by rabbits* (cf. Reinhart, 1982, p.18). In this case the NP *a child of my acquaintance* is [-IDENT] and [+NEW]. A topic can also be [+IDENT] and [+NEW], e.g. in ***My father*** bought a new car yesterday. The combination of the parameters [+IDENT] and [-NEW] means that the topic has already been mentioned before in the discourse and is therefore identifiable. It is not possible to combine the parameters [-IDENT] and [-NEW] because a referent which has already been evoked in the discourse is always identifiable by the percipient (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, pp.81/82).

In spoken language the speaker usually does not talk about just one ST or one DT, but he accumulates different topics which means that he is talking about "multiple topics" (Barnes, 1985, p.40)[7]. Double LD-constructions often consist of a pronominal and a lexical LD, e.g.

(4)   […] *nous* aujourd'hui <u>les peintres</u> *on* <u>les</u> classe comme peintres italiens […] (NIC-R00PUB001, S. p.4).
       engl. ***Concerning ourselves*** <u>the painters</u> *we* classify <u>them</u> as Italian painters […].

3. METHODICAL APPROACH

Construction Grammar demands a "usage-based" examination of a construction (Goldberg, 2006, p.4) or an analysis of the "pragmatic situation of the interlocutors" (Croft, 2001, p.19)[8].

The methodical approach of this current study is to examine the different interactive discourse functions of *moi je* in colloquial European French discourses and to see if this construction has already been entrenched to a

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[2] The linguists of the Prague School of Structural and Functional Linguistics (e.g. Daneš, 1974; Mathesius, 1975) consider the parameters GIVEN and NEW as opposites which means that they cannot be combined with each other. An entity is either GIVEN or NEW. For more information about this discussion and about the problem concerning the definition of the terms *theme* and *rheme* see Ewert-Kling (2010, Chap. 3.1, 3.1.2 ; 2011b, p.81s.).

[3] Cf. Wehr (1984, p.1s.; 1994, p.621; 2000, p.252s.; 2007, p.479), Barnes (1985, p.28), Reinhart (1982, p.3), Lambrecht (1995, p.117, 201), Gabriel (2007, p.24), Likhacheva-Philippe (2007, p.375) and Ewert-Kling (2010, Kap. 3.2.1 und 2011b, p.85).

[4] Cf. Reinhart (1982, p.5), Wehr (1984, p.1; 2007, p.478), Lambrecht (1995, p.127), Stark (1997, p.38; 2002, p.311), Gabriel (2007, p.23) and Ewert-Kling (2010, p. 63; 2011b, p.84; 2012, p.109).

[5] For more information concerning the *aboutness-test* to identify a DT see Reinhart (1982, p.5) and Ewert-King (2012, p.110).

[6] Some scientists like the members of the Prague School of Structural and Functional Linguistics argue however that themes (= topics) have to be placed sentence initially. The existence of topics in Right Detachment position shows that topics can also be placed at the end of an already complete sentence, e.g. *He is beautiful, **your brother*** (cf. Ewert-King, 2010, p.64).

[7] Cf. also Wehr (2000, p.252) and Ewert-Kling (2010, Chap. 5.3).

[8] Fischer (2006, p.3) and Günther (2008, p.158) complain however that corpus analysis and analysis of the pragmatic context are missing in many papers dealing with the constructionist approach.

certain degree. For this purpose the *Corpus de Référence du Français Parlé* (CRFP), a corpus of spontaneous spoken European French, has been analyzed[9]. Although the CRFP might be a relatively small corpus (400,000 words), the analysis shows obvious results as will be seen below. For the present analysis just the private and public conversations of the corpus (and not the professional ones) were considered, because these kinds of conversations contain a strong informal language use. The private conversations represent two third of the whole corpus (62.9%), while the public conversations are up to 19.7%[10].

4. *MOI JE* AND ITS INTERACTIVE FUNCTIONS

With regard to *Cognitive Construction Grammar*, constructions are "form-meaning correspondences" (Goldberg, 1995, p.1). Concerning the LD-construction *moi je*, the form is morphosyntactically marked while the pragmatic meaning is its topic-marking function. This means that the pragmatic function of the construction *moi je* is to mark the topic of the sentence or the topic of the discourse.

The pragmatic functions of LDs like topic-establishing, topic-continuity or topic-shift can be called *informative discourse functions* (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2011a, p.139). By analyzing the pronominal construction *moi je* in its pragmatic context, the results of the corpus show however that *moi je* is frequently used to express *interactive discourse function* such as turn-taking and perspectivation (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.196; 2011a, p.159) which is also called *subjectification* (cf. Traugott, 1995, p.31).

It is obvious that the speaker rather prefers talking about himself and his own point of view than talking about the interlocutor's opinions and experiences. Kuno calls this the principle of "speaker's empathy" (Kuno, 1987, p.206) which is based on the *Speech-Act Participant Empathy Hierarchy*:

> [i]t is easiest for the speaker to empathize with himself (i.e. to express his own point of view); it is next easiest for him to express his empathy with the hearer; it is most difficult for him to empathize with the third party, at the exclusion of the hearer or himself. (Kuno, 1976, p.433, cf. also Kuno, 1987, p.212; Wehr, 1984, p.5)

By using the pronominal construction *moi je* the speaker gets the possibility to place himself in the centre of attention, because *moi je* enables the speaker to either mark himself as the DT (if he wants to talk about himself and his experiences etc.) or to mark himself as the ST. In the second case, the speaker can create a

relation between the DT and himself which means that he (as a ST) can express his own perspective on a certain discourse topic.

When we are talking about the function of perspectivation or subjectification, we are referring to the speaker's possibility to express

a) his own experiences, perceptions and impressions (function of the *experiencer*, cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.198; 2011a, p. 160[11]) as well as

b) his personal attitude (cf. Dik, 1997, p.425) such as his opinion and emotion.

In the corpus a high frequency of *moi je* in the function of subjectification can be analyzed. Example (5) verifies that *moi je* can be used by the speaker in the function of the *experiencer* which means that the speaker is involved in a certain way in the content of the conversation:

(5) [*The speaker is talking about his experiences on a film set*]:
    L2 et tu as déjà créé […] un petit film
    L1 ouais ouais […] <je suis en train de le finir
    L2 c'est vrai> – et vous étiez en équipe
    L1 euh ben ***moi j'***ai ***j'***ai tourné tout seul euh […] ***moi j'***ai ***j'***ai fait ça tout seul […]. (PCR-R00PRI001, S. p.5).

engl. L2 and have you already created […] a little movie
    L1 yeah, yeah <I am about to finish it
    L2 that's true> – and have you done it in a team
    L1 uh well, ***concerning myself, I*** have filmed on my own uh […], ***I*** have done it on my own […].

Concerning the function of subjectification the corpus data shows that the speaker's attitude is even more frequently expressed by *moi je* as the function of the *experiencer,* especially in connection with psychological verbs such as *trouver* 'to find', *penser* 'to think' and *croire* 'to believe' etc. which describe a psychological event or state such as a personal statement or subjective feeling. In the example (6) the speaker expresses his opinion by using *moi je*:

(6) [*The speaker is talking about the Corsican language*]:
    L2 et puis il y a beaucoup de gens qui ne se sentent pas concernés par le corse – donc ***moi je*** pense qu'on devrait...
    qu'on devrait laisser – aux étudiants […] de choisir s'ils veulent apprendre le corse ou non […]. (COR-R00PUB001, S. p.1).

engl. L2 and then there are many people who don't feel concerned about the Corsican – well ***concerning myself/"I*** think we should let – the students decide if they want to learn Corsican or not […].

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[9] For more detail see http://sites.univ-provence.fr/veronis/pdf/2004-presentation-crfp.pdf and Ewert-King (2010, Chap. 4.1).
[10] Professional conversations are forming 17,4% of the corpus.

[11] Cf. also Hidalgo Downing (2003, p.67).

In the example (7) the speaker is describing his own feelings concerning the DT:

(7) [*Conversation about current fashion styles among young people*]:

L2 […] quelle est votre opinion sur la mode actuelle […] pour les

jeunes hein

L1 pour les jeunes hein

L2 ouais ouais

L1 bien – ***moi j'***aime ça […]. (CAH-R00PRI002, S. p.3).

engl. L2 […] what do you think about young people's current fashion style huh

L1 about young people

L2 yeah yeah

L1 well – ***concerning myself "I*** like that […].

Besides the pragmatic function of the perspectivation or subjectification *moi je* expresses another discourse function which can probably be considered as the most frequent interactive function of this construction: the function of turn-taking. *Moi je* is mostly used in debates, discussions or interviews to express turn-taking because it enables the speaker to indicate a topic-change and to "gain access to the floor" (Duranti/Ochs, 1979, p.413). With the pronominal LD *moi je* the speaker emphasizes his egocentric behavior and takes the turn by marking himself as the topic or by making a contribution to a current discourse topic. This "floor-seeking behavior" (Duranti/Ochs ,1979, p.403) can be seen in the following example:

(8) [*Conversation about the Corsican language*]:

L4 je sais pas chez toi peut-être que ça parle le corse <moi chez moi ça parle pas corse

L2 moi personnellement[12] chez moi moi ça parle corse>

L3 ***moi je*** vois ma grand-mère ma grand-mère

L4 ouais mes grands-parents non

L3 ma grand-mère elle […] parle bien – mais avec moi elle parle jamais [le corse] […] (COR-R00PUB001, S. p.3).

engl. L4 I don't know in your family you probably speak Corsican<in my family we don't speak Corsican

L2 concerning myself in my family we speak Corsican>

L3 ***Concerning myself***, when ***I*** look at my grandmother my grandmother

L4 yeah my grandparents no

L3 my grandmother she speaks well – but with me she never speaks [Corsican] […].

The interesting point about example (8) is that speaker 3 is taking his turn with the pronominal *moi je*-construction without actually wanting to mark himself as

the DT in the further conversation. He just uses *moi je* as a *discourse marker* to get access to the floor and then introduces and establishes his grandmother as the DT in the following conversation. The verb *voir* ("to see") which expresses visual perception in his original sense is often used together with *moi je* to signal turn-taking. In these cases *voir* has semantically changed by losing his original meaning and by becoming a simple discourse marker that introduces a new referent as a topic in the discourse (here the speaker's grandmother) (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.209).

5. PRAGMATICALIZATION AND FUNCTIONAL ROUTINIZATION OF *MOI JE*

The present study with the functional analysis of *moi je* proofs some kind of pragmatic change from an originally topic-marking to a nowadays almost conventionalized construction in certain contexts such as turn-taking or perspectivation. This means that the pronominal LD *moi je* has already reached a certain degree of "entrenchment" (Croft, 2007, p.499). The phenomena of entrenchment can also be called *automation* (De Smet/Cuyckens, 2007, p.188), *pragmaticalization* ("Pragmatikalisierung", Mroczynski, 2012), *conventionalization* (Fried, 2009) or *functional routinization* (cf. Detges & Waltereit, 2011, p.184; Ewert-Kling, 2012)[13].

Pragmaticalization[14] or functional routinization is defined here as the process in which a language unit loses its semantic meaning or its original pragmatic function in a certain context by becoming a simple discourse marker[15]. Under the synchronic aspect there are two important factors that proof an ongoing process of pragmaticalization concerning the LD-construction *moi je*:

a) The analyzed construction is losing its original pragmatic function of topic marking in certain communication situations

b) The construction is more and more syntactically entrenched ("syntaktische Verfestigung", cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, p.113).

For this purpose the discourse context has to be examined to see in which situations the speaker uses *moi je* very frequently and quasi automatically. From this automation a certain obligatory use of the construction in certain contexts can be deduced which means that *moi je* has lost its pragmatic function of topic marking and is therefore used as a simple discourse marker to express

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[12] In this special case *moi* without the coreferential subject pronoun *je is to be considered* as a *Chinese style-Topic* (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2010, Chap. 5.1.4).

[13] In this case Ziem and Lasch (2013, p.40) talk about "kognitive Verfestigung".

[14] Günther/Mutz (2004, p.98) and Diewald (2010, 2011) give a summary of the difficult differentiation between *grammaticalization* and *pragmaticalization*.

[15] Cf. Rossi (1999, p.186), Dostie (2004, p.27), Diewald (2008, 2011a/2011b) and Frank-Job (2010, p.300).

turn-taking and perspectivation (which the corpus data proof, see below in Table 1).

Table 1
Tokens of *Moi je* in CRFP Expressing Interactive Functions

Interactive discourse functions of *moi je*	Tokens in CRFP	Results in %
Turn-taking and perspectivation	2,123	98,2%
Other functions (e.g. contrastive focus)	37	1,8%
Σ	2160	100%

Before we go into detail concerning the results of the corpus analysis, we first have to take a closer look at the syntactic situation of *moi je* which has been argued quite a lot. Koch (1993, p.183) for example considers this construction as an obligatory supplementary subject conjugation. From the syntactic point of view this is correct, because the use of the stressed subject pronoun *moi* syntactically triggers the use of the unstressed subject pronoun *je* (see also Koch & Oesterreicher, 2011, p.178).

But which is more interesting for our study of the functional routinization is the behaviour of *moi je* in its *pragmatic* context. The focus is therefore to analyze if there is a *pragmatic* (and not syntactic!) difference between the unmarked construction *je (parle)* (engl., I (talk)) and the marked construction *moi je (parle)*, which both can be used by the speaker, and to see in which discourse contexts the speaker prefers one of these constructions. Besides that it is also important to detect the intensity of the pragmatic function of *moi je* in certain communication situations. These points lead to the question if the speaker is still aware of the original pragmatic topic function while using *moi je* or if he is already using *moi je* automatically as a discourse marker in certain contexts.

To analyze the *degree* of the entrenchment it is important to have a "sufficient frequency"[16] or a certain "Auftretensfrequenz" (Ziem/Lasch, 2013, p.38) of this construction. This means that the construction *moi je* has to be used so frequently in certain discourse situations that this construction can be considered as "entrenched" or "routinized" as a simple discourse marker.

The results of the analysis are quite obvious which can be seen in table 1. *Moi je*-constructions are used in 98,2% of all cases (2,123 tokens) to express turn-taking and perspectivation and in just 1.8 % (37 tokens), *moi je* is used in other pragmatic contexts such as contrastive focus[17].

Especially in connection with psychological verbs such as *penser* 'to think' and *croire* 'to believe' *moi je* shows a very high degree of entrenchment which means very strong tendencies of functional routinization or pragmaticalization (cf. Ewert-Kling, 2012, p.114). This means that *moi je* is already automated in certain communication situations such as turn-taking, announcement of the experiencer and expression of the speaker's opinion or feelings. In these contexts, *moi je* seems to be routinized which means that this construction has lost its originally topic-marking function by becoming a simple discourse marker. In certain contexts the speaker doesn't seem to be aware any more that *moi je* originally had a topic marking function. In fact, he seems to use this construction automatically as a discourse marker of turn-taking or perspectivation without wanting to mark himself as the topic.

CONCLUSION

The results of the corpus analysis proof that certain constructions in spoken European French such as *moi je* are going through a process of pragmatic change: from originally topic-marking to nowadays almost automated and routinized constructions in certain contexts.

But as the pronominal construction *moi je* is not routinized in *every* discourse context, we cannot talk about a fully completed conventionalization, but just about a *gradual process* of entrenchment in certain communication contexts.

This means that spoken European French shows strong *tendencies* of functional routinization and it seems to get a more and more topic-prominent language (which can also be detected by the high frequency of other LD- and RD-constructions in spoken French). The future developments will show if and to which degree *moi je* will be routinzed in further pragmatic contexts. Lambrecht already diagnosed in 1981 that:

> [...] NSF [= *non-standard French*] is a simultaneously topic-prominent and subject-prominent language, and that both topic sentences and subject sentences must be considered as *basic* constructions. (Lambrecht, 1981, p.52)

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[16]The question *when* we can talk about a "sufficient frequency" can not be answered, but this issue is discussed in different constructionist approaches (cf. ICCG8, Osnabrück. Retrieved from http://www.blogs.uni-osnabrueck.de/iccg8/)

[17] For more information about the contrastive focus see Gabriel (2007) and Ewert-Kling (2010, Chap. 3.4).

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