

DIFFERENTIAL IDENTITY BETWEEN LANGUAGES

A STUDY OF ASSERTION AND INTERROGATION
IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH¹

WILLIAM A. BENNETT

University of London

While it is well-known that syntax has a life of its own, determining meanings through alternative orders (e.g. *c'est...*, *est-ce...*, *you do...*, *do you...*), or the exhibition of elements sometimes known as 'empty morphemes',² the primary role of syntax is that of intermediary between substance and propositional kinds of meaning.

In the syntactic component of the grammar of a language the linguist will find evidence both of:

conciseness, distance from an easily interpretable semantic representation, and
explicitness, a surface representation, and adequate account of the meaning of a sentence.

Amongst the items in the following list:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1a. <i>il me faut</i> | 2a. <i>mnje holodno</i> 'to me cold' (neuter) (Russian: |
| b. <i>je dois</i> | b. <i>I'm cold</i> |
| | c. <i>j'ai froid</i> |

¹ In many ways this paper is a development of the one I presented at the third congress of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée Copenhagen 1972. This was published as "Simple sentences in three languages" (cf. Nickel, G. 1972: 12 - 20).

In the present paper, however, I am more concerned with the comparability within and between languages, and less with the particular items in the two languages which lend themselves to such comparison.

Both in preparing the Copenhagen paper and this I had the benefit of the views of friends and colleagues, among whom I would mention Professor Martin Harris, Drs. Andrew Radford and Bernard Comrie. The views in both papers, of course, remain my responsibility alone.

² The notion, rather than the label as such, is discussed within the terms of a generative grammar by Katz and Postal (1964 : 6 - 8).

those at a. in each case seem somehow 'closer' to the form that a semantic representation might be expected to take. Moreover, the contrast between concise and explicit is found across languages and within each language.

The list may be extended:

- a. *nǚ lěng bù lěng?*³
- b. *tjebje holodno, nie pravda-li?*
- c. *you're cold, aren't you?*
- d. *tu as froid, n'est-ce pas?*

to show that there is one form of 'yes/no' interrogative in Chinese (3a) that is more explicit, being the juxtaposition of positive and negative sentence forms, than one form of (conducive) 'yes/no' interrogative formally alike in Russian, English and French. These three languages achieve greater conciseness in this sentence type by the deletion of identical sentence constituents.

It would not be difficult to continue the list to show that (a) explicitness can be characterized very economically for very many -- if not all -- languages, (b) there are surprisingly few types of modification but enough to account for the development of conciseness. In what has been discussed so far it is possible to discern a modification which might be termed 'dative-raising', accounting for the conciseness of 1b, 2b, 2c. To account for 3b, 3c, 3d it is simply necessary to propose two modifications: 'interrogation' (or 'reordering') and 'equi-deletion'.⁴ It is important to note that the most reasonable account of the French structure presupposes an explicit

4. *tu as froid, ce n'est pas que tu aies (or as) froid.*

Conciseness in these examples must result (i) from the human supposition that human agency can be the controlling factor in most things, and the personal is preferred to the impersonal; in syntactic terms an oblique case pronoun is converted into the subject of the sentence: 'dative-raising', (ii) from the ease of recovering highly redundant items which are lost, together with the increasing load on the memory and time for communication. It would be surprising if there were not a strong tendency to concentrate information, making use of such signals of implicit meaning as order and omission of items.

³ I am grateful to Bob Sloss of Cambridge University for information and confirmation on the Chinese example.

⁴ It will be clear that the study is primarily a syntactic one, and reference is made to semantics only as far as it provides a basis for labelling such functions as 'conducive yes/no interrogative'. The formal analysis of language may propose a syntactically determined lexicon or, more usually, a lexically specified syntax. The role of lexis is quite different in (for one case) providing the verbal frame permitting or blocking 'dative-raising' (*devoir* as against *falloir*) or (for the other case) triggering 'equi-deletion'. Some degree of independence must be allowed for the lexical content of sentences if the syntactic interplay is to be fully explored.

It may well be asked why languages exhibit both explicit *and* concise sentence constituents if conciseness has the advantage of economy together with full meaning. But, of course, they do not have a 'full meaning' if there is no explicit alternative potentially available. In those circumstances where difficulties of communication arise, either through the differential language knowledge of two speakers or in a noisy environment, the greater explicitness available is a justification for the speaker's usual modifications. The balance between simplification for utterance and the assurance of interpretability is an important characteristic of language.

And a major simplification available to all speakers is the deletion of items which might otherwise be represented as a 'speech act' formula. The act of utterance presupposes, to the extent the utterance is more or less well-formed, an intention on the part of the speaker, and existence of the utterance presupposes the act of utterance. Although it is possible for the speaker to mark the speech act lexically as in

5. *I assert/claim (etc) that he cheats at cards*
a proposition of the kind is implied by the utterance alone

6. *he cheats at cards.*

Moreover the implication is usually that the speaker is asserting or claiming the truth of what is uttered. To block this implication the speaker may mark the speech act lexically

7. *I think that he cheats at cards,*

may ask a question

8. *does he cheat at cards?*

or may explicitly deny the presupposition,

9. *he doesn't cheat at cards.*

The speaker's responsibility for the truth of what he is saying, and the devices available for signalling the rejection of this responsibility, are of the greatest importance to any explanation of language use. A unified explanation of the subjunctive in modern French (cf. Bennett 1976) is possible only through an account of the role of speaker assertion.

The 'conduciveness' of an interrogative such as 3c or 3d results from its explicitness in ordering the positive before the negative. The syntax in each case is just sufficiently explicit to signal to the listener that the anticipated response is a positive one. On the other hand, if the interrogatives were otherwise ordered,

- 10a. *you aren't cold, are you?*
- b. *tu n'as pas froid, oui?*

a negative response would be presupposed. If one were to claim that, in propositional terms, the utterance of a 'yes/no interrogative' is a presentation of both positive and negative assertions with a request for selection of one, the syntax of conducive questions preserves enough explicit information to guide the hearer's choice.

Against the explicitness of 3a and the comparative explicitness of the conducive interrogatives of French and English, the neutral 'yes/no interrogatives' of the two languages are an extreme of conciseness. Alongside 8, French has, as one of the syntactic forms of this interrogative

11. *est-ce qu'il triche aux cartes?*

This sentence shares both with English (as in 8) and the alternative syntactic form in French

12. *triche-t-il aux cartes?*

the result of a modification which reorders verb and subject. The French structures differ in the category of the item which is fronted by the reordering. It might reasonably be argued that the item fronted in 11, the more frequent of the two 'syntactic yes/no interrogatives', is an 'empty morpheme' of the type to which the *do* of English sentences like 8 is sometimes assigned. Of importance is the unusual main clause order of having a verbal item first, and significant the availability for both languages of a dummy or auxiliary verb to take this initial position.

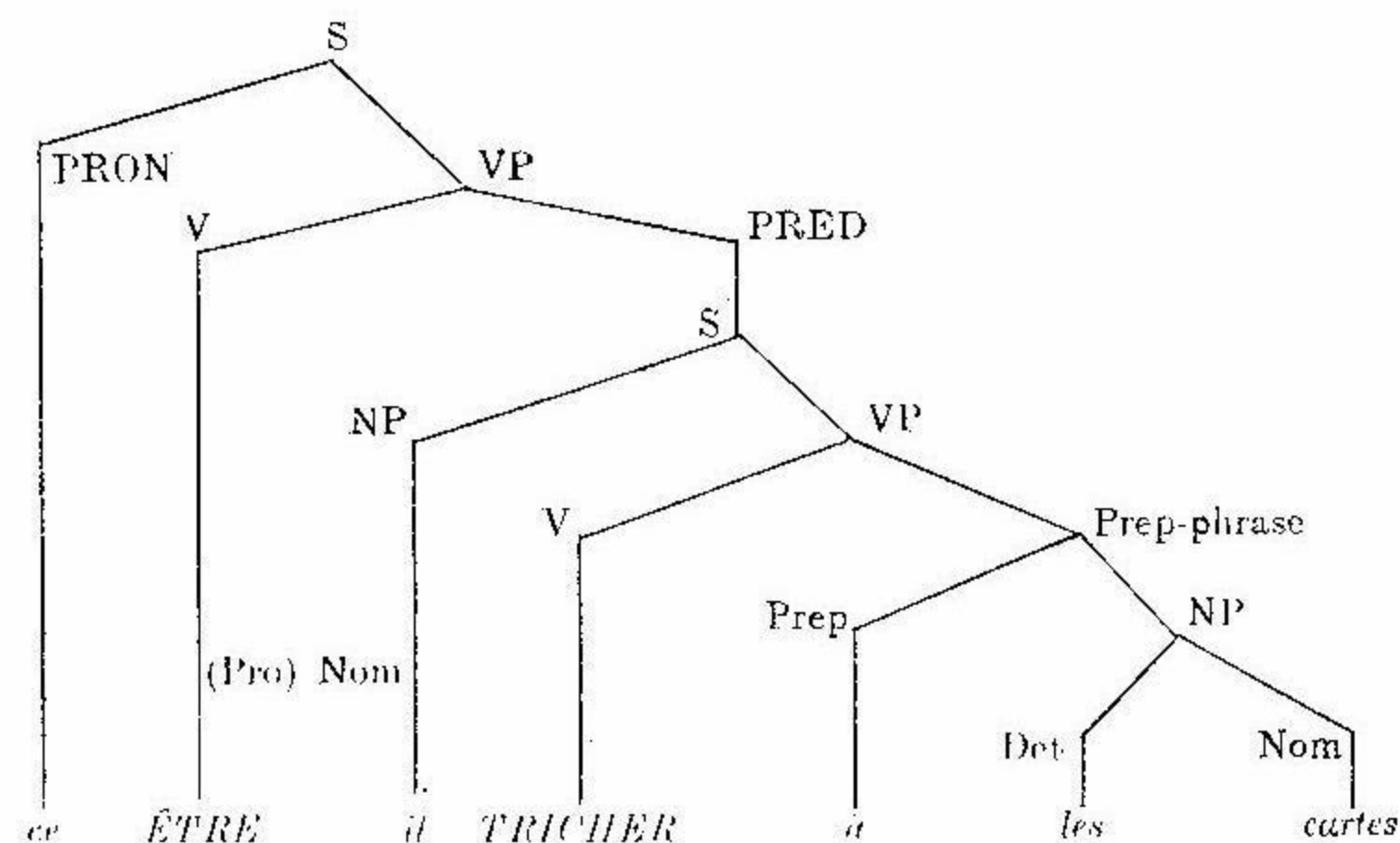
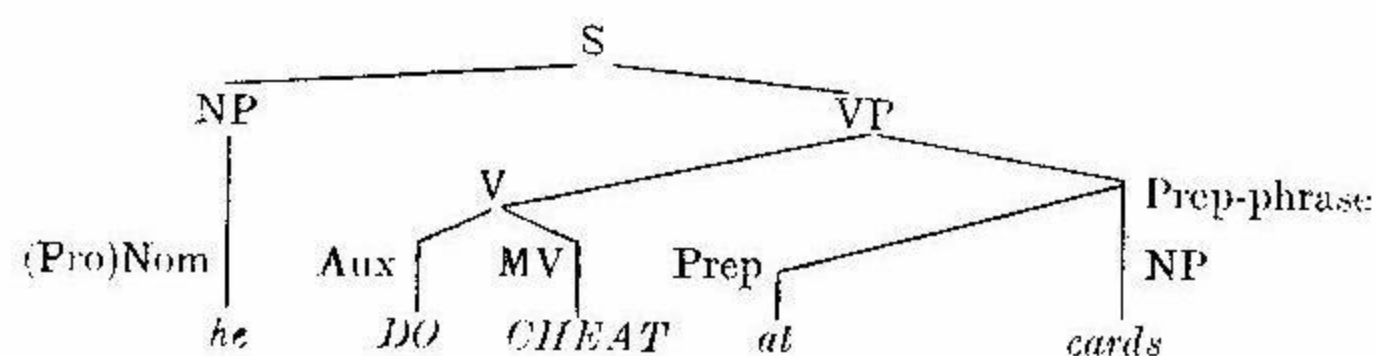
There is no clear and immediate relationship between meaning and these particular modifications. Some explanation might be possible in terms of the speaker's implicit response to focus on the verb, but this precludes a justification for the introduction of a dummy item at just that point where most information needs to be available. But the reordering involves items which appear elsewhere in the languages.

13a. *he does cheat at cards*

b. *c'est qu'il triche aux cartes*

are formally unrelated but are both (a) emphatic or assertive, in at least one meaning, (b) a possible formal source for 'yes/no interrogatives' in the two languages, although it is the underlying structures which would necessarily function as the sources:

FIGURE 1



There is no way at all for even native speakers to be able to say how it came about that they were using such sources and related structures, and asking them is not particularly helpful in the investigation of language. If one looks at the use made of language by any child in the world, and therefore irrespective of the specific language it would seem, one is aware of two distinct stages preceding what might be called the 'complication' of sophisticated language, as the child matures. The first stage is that of naming, denoting or 'labelling', while the next is that of coupling or 'concatenation'. These activities do not disappear as the individual grows but, as I have argued (Bennett 1974), persist as ways of categorising and sorting data throughout life, even though language facilitates a far different processing of data through 'complication' (this term, like the other two, is defined in Bennett 1974). Given the persistence of simplifying strategies it would not be surprising that native speakers of French regard [esk] as an interrogative prefix, and this is the analysis for which Roulet argued (1969:150). The particular strategies by which speaker/hearers rationalize their understanding of language may fall short of an explanation of the underlying relationships which support continued understanding by those speakers.

A similar problem arises in eliciting the views of adult native speakers of French about sentences such as 13b. The conditions attending the use of French during the last century make it unlikely that any speaker/hearer with the least amount of education will have a sense of spoken French as a language. A comparison of English and French is a comparison of written languages, and the content of such languages is prejudiced by the medium.

It is obvious that imperatives, vocatives, interrogatives and assertives are inappropriate to a use of language which is one-way. The 'rhetorical question' derives its effect from the very inappropriateness of having no immediate answer. In written use the 'pronoun' *ce* of *c'est* cannot be ostensive and must be textually referential. Consequently the sense of 13b in written language, and therefore most readily accessible to the consciousness of the native speaker is that of an emphatic referential, with a ready translation as "it's because he cheats at cards".

It is possible to discern another meaning for this structure, in, for example: "S'ils se trompaient, qu'il y aurait une loi de leur échec et que, sous certaines conditions définissables, ils auraient pu réussir" (Foucault 1967: 59). G. and R. Le Bidois (1935: 122) acknowledged this other sense: "Le langage populaire, ou même simplement familier, emploie volontiers *c'est que* d'une façon absolue ... La langue littéraire s'exprime parfois ainsi: "C'est que je me défie de lui, car il est raisonneur" Marivaux, *Jeu de l'Amour* II, 7. "C'est qu'il est encore lourd, pour un vieillard si maigre" A. Dumas, *Monte-Cristo* I, 20. Dans ces phrases, *c'est que* joue un double rôle: il souligne ce qui suit, en même temps qu'il suggère à l'esprit l'idée d'un rapport logique'. A similar problem of meaning does not attend the structure in English represented by sentence 13a.

Written French has available an emphatic (or assertive) negative, as in

14. *Non qu'il triche aux cartes,*

but one would search in vain for a positive partner to it. The ordinary negative,

15. *il ne triche pas aux cartes,*

is clearly a partner to the declarative

16. *il triche aux cartes.*

The spoken language equivalent to 14 is the negative of 13b

17. *ce n'est pas qu'il triche aux cartes.*

So syntactic evidence supports the argument that a contextually non-referential meaning of 13b exists, and we are justified in claiming that it is emphatic or better, because the emphasis is of the whole sentence, an assertive.

If the French sentence represented by 13b may be assertive a striking parallelism exists between French and English. In both languages the sole syntactic operation of reordering relates the assertive and the 'yes/no interrogative'. Moreover, a certain asymmetry between the sets containing these structures together with the negative and imperative in the two languages easily diverts attention from the formal relationship between the assertive

and the negative in each language. The items through which the relationships may be identified are quite different in the two languages, in English the verb *do* inflecting appropriately for number, person and tense, in French the sentence constituent *c'est* absolved from inflection by usage and decree.⁵

It is worth noting here that an alternative 'yes/no interrogative' in French

18. *Jean, triche-t-il aux cartes?*

is related by simple reordering to a sentence

19. *Jean, il triche aux cartes*

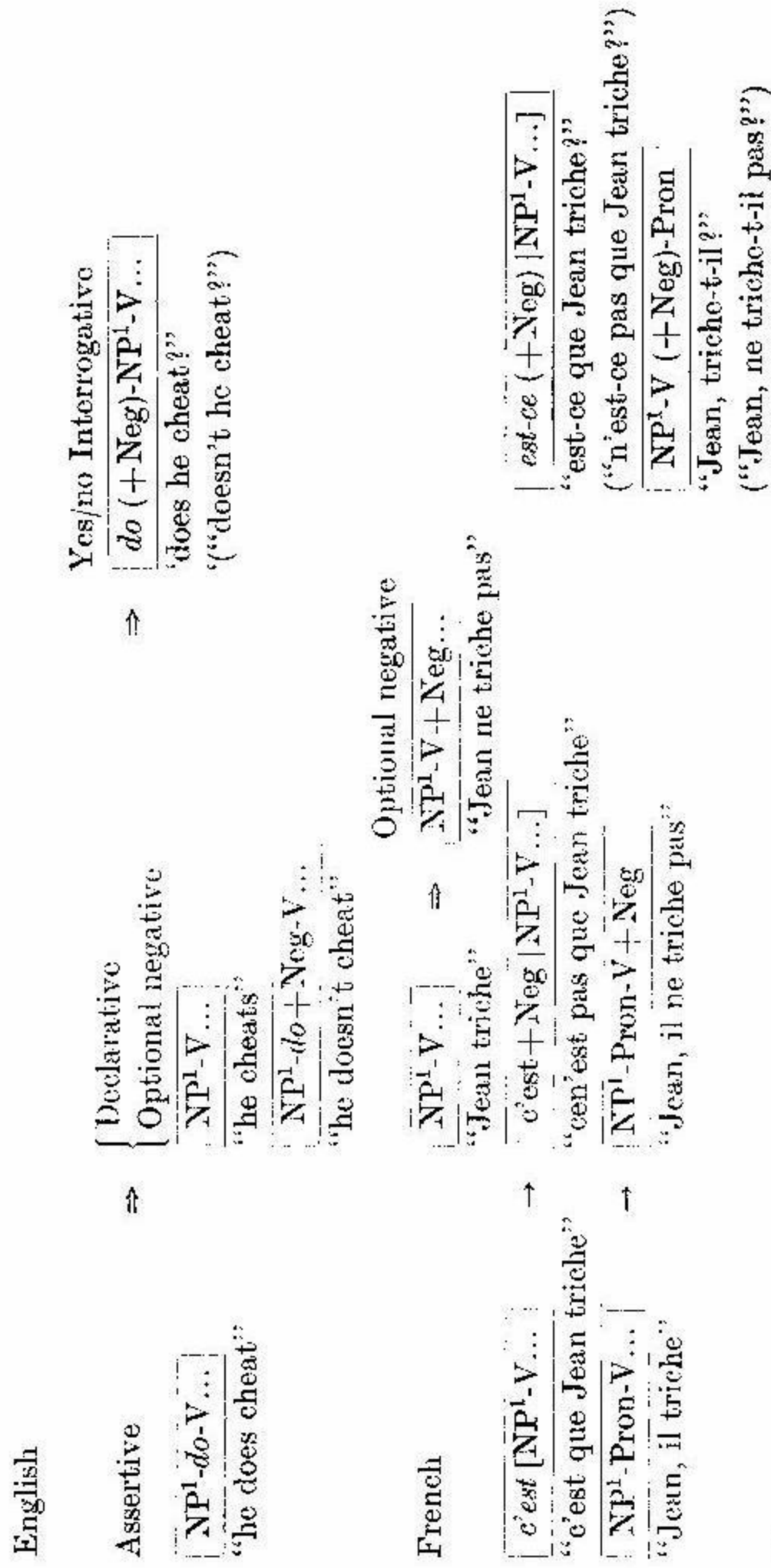
which if not strictly assertive is certainly emphatic, and not just emphasis of the first noun. Given the necessary syntactic reflexion of abstract relationships at the semantic level it is possible to explain why reordering of the declarative in modern French will not result in a grammatical sentence (**triche Jean aux cartes?*). In spoken French, of course, 'dislocated' sentences such as 19 are common but most analyses of European languages start from the written varieties. Again this is a case where the written language would offer the analyst no positive emphatic in explanation of other structures.

Figure 2 depicts the structural sets in the two languages. In French there are two negatives where in English there is only one. While negation may operate at each stage in French, it cannot operate on the declarative in modern English (**he cheats not at cards*⁶). Klima (1964: 255) showed concern that regarding *do* as an auxiliary entailed that "He does not leave" would be "He does leave" plus an optional *not*. The sentence without a helping verb "He leaves" would then have no parallel with *not*. Whatever difference it might make to the argument about the categorisation of *do* in the long run, there should be no concern about an absence of a parallel negative for the declarative of modern English. The negative and declarative are related through their relationship to the assertive. The 'yes/no interrogative' of modern English is related to the other two through the assertive. There is, of course, a further optional negation which may operate on the 'yes/no interrogative'. In French negation operates more freely than is the case in modern English. While it may be only focus which distinguishes the negative sentence 17 from

⁵ Such a decree was that of 26th February 1901 (VIII, 9) "Comme il règne une grande diversité d'usage relativement à l'emploi régulier de *c'est* ou de *ce sont*, et que les meilleurs auteurs ont employé *c'est* pour annoncer un substantif au pluriel, on tolérera dans tous les cas l'emploi de *c'est* au lieu de *ce sont*".

⁶ This negative, of course, is not meaningless or even ungrammatical for the English speaker — simply archaic. It represents an earlier stage of the language, the parallel with French thus having been even more extensive than it is at present. The difference between the languages has resulted in this case from the simplification of the set in English by the omission of the second negative, the 'negative declarative'.

Figure 2



Key:

Double arrows represent transformational relations

Single arrows indicate the particular structures which are linked

Boxes enclose structural descriptions

20. *c'est qu'il ne triche pas aux cartes,*

there is a sharp meaning differential between either of these sentences and 15. Although modern English is quite able to give representation to such a difference of meaning, for example, by contrasting 9 and sentences like "I don't say that he cheats...", "it isn't the case that he cheats...", there is no normal syntactic device for contrasting assertion and declaration in the negative. Nor does English have anything to compare with the set, of which sentences 18 and 19 would be members, which closely resembles the 'c'est que...' set in its semantic-structural interrelations. French is not alone in having colloquial sentence forms in which the topic is presented first, followed by a comment in the form of a proposition. Given the need for speakers to capture the attention of others, and to ensure that the topic is grasped, the order and form of 19 is not surprising.

21. *John, he cheats at cards*

plays no part in the structural organisation of English, as the comparable (assertive) sentence does in French. And French has the same kinds of modification in both sets *in the representation of equivalent meanings*.

While the system of negations results in many more possibilities for French there is no difference in the parameters along which the two languages operate in representing a small but important set of functions: assertion, declaration, negation and interrogation are related by deletion, insertion and reordering. It could be added that the imperative in the two languages is derived also by deletion. The striking degree of similarity between the two languages in syntactic development over this small area is in marked contrast to the apparent dissimilarity of the items involved in the principal modifications.

For reasons which were indicated in the opening part of this paper, syntactic arrangements in a sentence or sentence constituent cannot be expected to represent directly the meaning or even, more modest requirement, the function of the item. There is a constant tension between the drive to conciseness and the demands of explicitness, and languages will be moving in different ways and at different rates under these twin pressures. The comparison of small randomly chosen samples is bound to be unrewarding. However, certain areas of language use are necessarily more stable than others, and the use of language to assert, to declare, to request information or response behaviour must be amongst the foremost of these. In a 'meaning-set' defined by such functions it seems probable that simplicity and stability of structural information will ensure the compromise between explicitness and conciseness that has been clear, in spite of differences of detail, in French and English. It is through the study of such 'meaning-sets' that languages may be compared, for it must constantly be asked how speakers of the languages compared easily produce and understand the information conveyed through syntactic modification when they assert something or request a choice of assertions.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, W. A. 1972. "'Simple' sentences in three languages". In Nickel, G. 1972. Vol. I. 12 - 20.
- Bennett, W. A. 1974. *Applied linguistics and language learning*. London: Hutchinson.
- Bennett, W. A. 1976. "A concise explanation of the subjunctive in modern French". (to be published).
- Fodor, J. A. and J. J. Katz. (eds). 1964. *The structure of language: readings in the philosophy of language*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall.
- Foucault, M. 1967. *Theatrum philosophicum. Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Katz, J. J. and P. M. Postal. 1964. *An integrated theory of linguistic descriptions*. Cambridge, Mass.: the M. I. T. Press.
- Klima, E. S. 1964. "Negation in English". In Fodor, J. A. and J. J. Katz. 1964. 246 - 324.
- Le Bidois, G. and R. 1935. *Syntaxe du français moderne*. Paris: Picard.
- Nickel, G. (ed.). 1972. *Proceedings of the 3rd Congress of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, Copenhagen 1972*. Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag.
- Roulet, E. 1969. *Syntax de la proposition nucléaire en français parlé*. Bruxelles: AIMAV and Paris: Didier.