Acquiring nominal subject inversion in L2 French[*]

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Abstract : Word order in contemporary French is resolutely SVO. Post-verbal subject configurations are still found (Cappeau and Lahousse 2015), although they are restricted as to syntactic context, subject type, register and frequency. Outside interrogatives, they are attested in some assertive contexts, although they are generally rare beyond higher registers. How such an infrequent configuration is acquired is a question that arises. In order to answer this question, we focus on nominal subject inversion in relative clauses. These are examined through the performance of L2 speakers whose mother tongue routinely allows for subject inversion, to assess whether transfer obtains from a default L1 word order to a marked L2 configuration. The results from cloze-tests show that Algerian Arabic speakers have a limited command of inversion in relatives. If Pozniak, Abeillé and Hemforth (2021) are correct that such inversions are bound to subtle interpretative cues, our results confirm the difficulty for L2 learners to acquire a marked, rare configuration, even under potential transfer conditions.

Keywords: Acquisition, nominal subject inversion, relative clauses, L2 French

1.   Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the acquisition of clausal word order. As a property that characterizes the shape of languages, clausal word order is crucially defined by the observable position of the subject. In a language like French, subjects are resolutely preverbal. Post-verbal subjects are also found with restrictions in terms of syntactic context, subject-type, register and frequency. L1 default word order acquisition is beginning to be reasonably well understood (Gavarró 2020). But what of marked word order? The question of the L2 acquisition of marked word order is explored here through one particular configuration, post-verbal subjects in relatives in French. The command of the construction is assessed in L2 speakers of a mother tongue that routinely allows subject inversion. Algerian

Arabic, as indeed most Maghreb varieties, has a default VSO word order, including in relative clauses (Souag 2006). Will the default rule of their mother tongue help the speakers acquire marked inversion in French relative clauses? Results from cloze-tests show that the marked word order is significantly less well mastered than the preverbal configuration: transfer of a default word order does not carry to a marked word order.

The article is structured as follows. First, the status of post-verbal subjects in contemporary French is briefly presented, before evoking some of the few studies of L2 subject inversion acquisition. The protocol used to gather data on L2 knowledge of post-verbal subjects in French relatives is then presented, before the data are analyzed. The low levels of mastery of the configuration may relate to the avoidance of a marked configuration associated with subtle interpretative cues.

2.   Nominal subject inversion in contemporary French

2.1   Inversion types

Clausal word order in contemporary French is characterized by a resolutely preverbal subject configuration. Other configurations are not excluded, and comprise what is known by the descriptive label of subject inversion. A post-verbal subject is constrained by syntactic context. Total interrogatives allow post-verbal subject pronouns in higher registers (Kayne 1973, Rizzi and Roberts 2009, Meisel, Elsig and Bonnesen 2011, Stark and Binder 2021):

(1)   Est-   il   parti?
        be-PR-3S   3S-NOM   go-PTCP
        'Is he gone?'
(2)   Paul   est-   il   parti?
        Paul   be-PR-3S   3S-NOM   go-PTCP
        'Is Paul gone?'
(3)   * Est   Paul   parti ?
        Be-PR-3S   Paul   go-PTCP
        'Is Paul gone?'

Subject inversion is also found in a number of specific assertive sentences that have been the object of a great number of descriptive studies (Blinkenberg 1928, Le Bidois 1952, Spang-Hanssen 1971, Togeby 1971, Jonare 1976, Korzen 1987, Godard 1988, De Wind 1995,

Friedemann 1997, Fuchs 1997, Hulk and Pollock 2001, Lahousse 2003, Fuchs 2006, Gerdes and Muller 2006, Copy and Gournay 2007, Lahousse 2011). These configurations are listed by Bonami and Godard (2001), from which the following categories and examples are taken (see also Marandin 2003, 2011, Cappeau and Lahousse 2015, and GGF 2021).

- extraction contexts (relatives, clefts, topicalisation ; including partial interrogatives)

(4) a. L'enfant   auquel   parlera   Paul
         the child   REL-IO   speak-FUT-3S   Paul
         'The child to who(m) Paul will speak'
     b. * L'enfant   auquel   parlera   -t-   il
         the child   REL-IO   speak-FUT   -3S   3S-NOM
         'The child to who(m) he will speak'

- locative inversion (see Cornish 2001)

(5) a. Sur la place   se   dresse   la cathédrale.
         on the place   REFL   stand-PR-3S   the cathedral
         'On the place stands the cathedral'
     b. ?* Sur la place se   dresse-t-il.
         on the place   REFL stand-PR-3S-NOM
         'On the place stands it'

- heavy nominal inversion

(6) a. Se présenteront   à cinq heures
         REFL present-FUT-3P   at five hours

         tous les étudiants qui   ont   échoué   à l'examen.
         all the students   REL-NOM have-3P   fail-PTCP   to the exam

         'The students who have failed the exam shall present themselves at five o'clock'

b. * Se présenteront ils à cinq heures.

REFL present-FUT-3P 3P-NOM at five hours

'They shall present themselves at five o'clock'

- citation adjunct clause

(7) a. « J'arrive ! », cria Jean.

1S-NOM come-PR-1S shout-PST-3S Jean

'"I'm coming!", John shouted'

b. « J'arrive ! », cria -t -il.

1S-NOM come-PR-1S shout-PST-3S 3S-NOM

'"I'm coming!", he shouted'

- unaccusative verbs

(8) a. Entra Paul.

Enter-PR-3S Paul

'Paul came in.'

b. * Entra -t- il.

Enter-PR-3S 3S-NOM

'He came in.'

To these can be added (following Fuchs 2006) modal inversion

(9) a. * Serait là Paul,

be-COND-3S there Paul

je ne le croirais pas.

1S-NOM Neg 3S-ACC believe-COND-1S Neg

'Would Paul be there, I wouldn't believe it.'

b. Serait   -il   là,
be-COND-3S -3S-NOM   there

je   ne   le   croirais   pas.
1S-NOM   Neg   3S-ACC   believe-COND-1S   Neg

'Would he be there, I wouldn't believe it.'

and V2 constructions with initial particles (see Lahousse 2014)

(10) a.   Ainsi le   croit   Paul.
          Thus 3S-ACC believe-PR-3S   Paul
          'Thus Paul believes it.'
     b.   Ainsi le   croit-   il.
          Thus 3S-ACC believe-PR-3S   3S-NOM
          'Thus he believes it.'

The examples make it plain that there are restrictions of subject types. Of the seven listed constructions, six are attested with a full nominal phrase (extraction, locative, heavy NP, citation, unaccusative, V2, but not modal), and three with clitics (citation, modal, V2, but not extraction, locative, heavy nominal or unaccusative), and two with both (citation, V2). Restrictions are also found in terms of registers. This is shown by the data in the contemporary spoken French Orféo Gold corpus through the Grewmatch search portal (http://orfeo.grew.fr/?corpus=cefc-gold). Looking at full nominals, it is found that 25 clauses have a post-verbal subject, and that 823 have a preverbal subject. This yields a brute ratio of 3%,. In written material searchable through Grewmatch, 69 nominals are post-verbal in the written corpus Sequoia, as compared to 967 preverbal cases, for a ratio of 7,1%. A similar investigation of spoken and written contemporary French provides 2,7% of post-verbal subjects in the former and 4,5% in the latter (Poiret and Liu 2020: 371). The divide might be even more marked in relative clauses. In her study of relative clauses in a corpus of *Le Monde* newspaper articles, Fuchs (1997) finds that 41% of nominal subjects were postposed (see also Abeillé et al 2016). The gap with the rate of inversion in relative clauses in the spoken medium is thus probably considerable, although this still remains to be assessed by a dedicated study.

2.2   Acquisition of inversion

Since subject inversion outside relative clauses in higher registers is relatively rare in French, it is explored in relatively few acquisitional studies.

Palasis (2015) shows that L1 speakers do not use subject inversion before schooling, and suggests that the configuration is not part of the immediate competence of speakers. Likewise, the study by Meisel, Elsig and Bonnesen (2011) show that clitic subject inversion in interrogatives is obsolescent, and a feature of higher registers. This leads L1 informants who have not been exposed to it to provide judgements marked by a variability comparable to L2 speakers. Inversions in partial interrogative in L1 English have been studied by Rowland and Pine (2000). They propose a usage-based approach to show the influence of frequency of inversion with particular wh-question markers in the input on the children's acquisitional history.

A similar difficulty is documented for subject inversion in main clause assertives. Subject inversion in French relatives is not free variation according to Pozniak, Abeillé and Hemforth (2021), but bound to interpretative dimensions: « object relatives with and without inversion are not merely stylistic variants (i.e., two equivalent syntactic ways of expressing one meaning), but are more or less preferred depending on their properties." (2021: 151). Using corpora, as well as self-paced reading and acceptability judgment experiments, they identify dimensions that mainly have to do, apart from the relative length of subject and verb, with a lower level of agentivity of the subject. These subtle interpretative values create difficulties for both L1 and L2 French speakers who find object relative clauses harder to process than subject relative clauses, and object relative clauses with subject inversion hardest of all (Pozniak and Hemforth 2015).

This is convergent with data from L2 Italian and Spanish (Leonini and Belletti 2003, Belletti and Leonini 2004 and Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007), where L2 adult speakers struggle to acquire the pragmatic values of such configurations and rely on configurations calqued from their L1 to convey those values (on pragmatic values of inversion in Spanish and Italian, see Leonetti 2017). Likewise, Domínguez and Arche (2014) show that advanced English learners struggle to identify the pragmatic determinant of inversion with Spanish unergative verbs, and tend to overgeneralize.

Questions that emerge from the few available studies on word order acquisition is whether indeed subject inversion as a marked configuration in a language like French is indeed more difficult to master than the default preverbal subject. The answer is presumably positive.

But what about L2 French speakers whose mother tongue contains default subject inversion? Will the speakers of such a language better master the marked subject inversion in a second language? One way to answer this question is articulated by the protocol described in the next section.

3. Research protocol

The question that we are asking in this paper is whether subject inversion is acquired by L2 French learners. We specifically look at subject inversion in relative clauses, as in (4) above. Such inversion is found with nominal subjects, remains a feature of higher registers, and is intuitively rare, if present at all, in vernacular practice. It is available with most relative pronouns (except the subject relative pronoun itself).

(11) Le café   que   cherchent   les clients

     The café   REL-ACC   look-PR-3PL   the-PL client-PL

     The café   that the clients are looking for

(12) Le café   dont   parlent   les clients

     The café   REL-IO   talk-PR-3PL   the-PL client-PL

     The café that the clients are talking about

(13) Le café   où   mangent   les clients

     The café   REL-OBL   eat-PR-3PL   the-PL client-PL

     The café where the clients are eating

(14) Le café   dont   sont sortis   les clients

     The café   REL-GEN   be-PR-3PL out-PTCP   the-PL client-PL

     The café, the clients of which came out

In order to elicit data on subject inversion in relative clauses, we use a questionnaire that was prepared by Foucher Stenkløv, Helland and Larrivée (2022) to investigate relative clause acquisition by Norwegian learners. The questionnaire was made up of 28 items that related to the choice between subject relative *qui* and object relative *que*. These divided into three types of questions. One was of the cloze test type, which represented half the questions (n=14), and to which the four same answer options are offered. The multiple-choice answer format was chosen by Foucher Stenkløv, Helland and Larrivée (2022) to allow automatic assessment of

answers on a university online system. This question type is illustrated below by the first question.

[1] Mon voisin est celui ... la ville a élu comme maire
'My neighbor is the one who … the city elected as mayor'
- qui   REL-NOM
- que   REL-ACC
- à qui   'To whom'
- aucune de ces réponses   'None of the above'

The second was grammaticality judgment (n=12). A statement containing a sentence with a *qui* or *que* relative, that is either correct or incorrect, and the same multiple-choice of five possible answers was presented to learners. This is exemplified below:

[4] Est-ce que l'exemple suivant est bien formé en français? « Il nous faut un interprète que puisse parler aux réfugiés »
'Is the following well-formed in French? "We need an interpreter that can can speak to refugees"'
- oui, il est bien formé   'yes, it is well-formed'
- il est un peu bizarre   'it is a little strange'
- il est très bizarre   'it is very strange'
- il est mal formé   'it is ill-formed'
- je ne suis pas sûr.e   'I'm not sure'

The third and final type of questions was two requests for open-ended justifications of a response to a cloze-test question.

[13] Quelle réponse avez-vous donné à "C'est le curé ... le maire surveillait de près. » ? Expliquer brièvement pourquoi
'What answer did you give to "It's the priest … the mayor was closely watching"? Explain why'

This questionnaire may seem a roundabout way to investigate knowledge of subject inversion, since the questionnaire is patently designed to investigate relative marker choice. However, we

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felt that it was a good instrument to test performance with and without subject inversion, as it provided comparable structural conditions, and avoided the observer's paradox as it did not obviously focus on subject position. The informants were students of the Higher School of Applied Sciences, in Tlemcen (Algeria). They are third year students of an Applied Science undergraduate degree, their university studies is in French, and their programme includes teaching of French communication. Their shared mother tongue is Algerian Arabic, a VSO language variety. They normally have an advanced command of spoken French, but may have an intermediate profile in written practice. Although the questionnaire was devised for a digital platform, it was for practical reasons distributed on paper. A total of 86 questionnaires were gathered. The informants' answers were manually entered in an Excel sheet, which allowed us to compute easily the results globally and by (groups of) answers. The results for subject inversion acquisition by these informants are described in the next section.

4.   Results

This research focuses on L2 acquisition of subject inversion in French relative clauses. The comparative mastery of post-verbal vs. preverbal subjects is measured through a subset of answers of cloze-test questions. Even though cloze tests only attest to part of competence and tend to yield higher target answer rates than free production (Foucher Stenkløv, Helland and Larrivée In press), they are useful in providing strictly comparable data. Here, comparison can be effected between inverted and non-inverted subjects in relative clauses headed by the object relative marker *que*, allowing us to evaluate the mastery of inversion in the same structural context.

The cloze test questions with target answer *que* are listed below. Three contain a compound tense that provide through past-participle agreement further indications of the target response. They further distinguish between an animate and an inanimate antecedent, as this factor has been shown to influence relative pronoun selection (Foucher Stenkløv, Helland and Larrivée 2022): There is a slight tendency to select nominative *qui* instead of target *que* with an animate antecedent.

without inversion, with an animate antecedent

[1]   Mon voisin est celui ... la ville a élu comme mère

'My neighbor is the one who … the city elected as mayor'

[28]   C'est le curé ... le maire surveillait

'It's the priest … the mayor was closely watching'

without inversion, with an inanimate antecedent

[2]   La question ... le journaliste lui a posée m'a quand même surprise

        'The question … the journalist asked him surprised me'

[10]   La seule sortie ... mon frère a faite a été d'aller au supermarché

        'The only outing … my brother made was to go to the supermarket'

with inversion, with an animate antecedent

[25]   Le seul électricien ... connaissaient mes soeurs dans le village a pris sa retraite

        'The only electrician … knew my sister in the village retired'

with inversion, with an inanimate antecedent

[5]   Je vais vous raconter une histoire ... chantaient les troubadours

        'I tell you a story … sung the troubadours'

[18]   Ces chaussures sont celles ... m'a achetées ma soeur

        'Those shoes are those … my sister bought me

These test items thus allow comparison of inversion and absence of inversion in similar structural environments to illuminate the level of mastery of the former. If as one might think the rarer and more constrained inversion configuration is more difficult to acquire than the default uninverted contexts, this should be visible in the lower target response rate of [25] vs. [1] and [28], and of [5] and [18] vs. [2] and [10].

The target response rate of these questions is provided in the following table. For the subcases of preposed and postposed nominal subjects in relative clauses, it presents the number of responses by informants corresponding to the expected form, the total number of target responses they could have provided, and the percentage of target responses.

		Number of target responses	Maximum number of responses	% of target responses
with inversion, with an animate antecedent	[25]	14	86	16%
without inversion, with an animate antecedent	[1]	31	86	36%
	[28]	48	86	56%
	aggregate	79	172	46%
with inversion, with an inanimate antecedent	[5[	40	86	46%
	[18]	42	86	49%
	aggregate	82	172	48%
without inversion, with an inanimate antecedent	[2]	69	86	80%
	[10]	56	86	65%
	aggregate	125	172	73%

Table 1. Rate of expected responses in choice of relative marker

The results are clearly in line with expectations about the lower level of mastery of post-verbal vs. preverbal subject. Globally, rates of target answers for post-verbal subjects is 37,2% (96 out of 258 possible answers), whereas they are 59,3% for preverbal subjects (204 out of 344 possible answers). The difference is statistically significant by a standard Chi-square test, with a p-value at < 0.00001. This extends to the subcases depending on the animacy of the antecedent noun. Rates of target answers for post-verbal subjects with an animate value are 16% as compared to 46% for preverbal subjects with the same animate value. Again, this difference is statistically significant, with a p-value at < 0.00001. For inanimate antecedents, the post-verbal subject target answer rate is 48%, and 73% for preverbal subjects. The p-value is again lower than 0.00001. The statistical significance attaches to comparison between post-verbal subjects with an animate antecedent at 16% of target answers and an inanimate one at 48%, with a p-

value at the same low rates. Finally, the comparison of preverbal subjects with an animate antecedent at 46% and with an inanimate antecedent at 73% has the same low p-value, indicating statistical significance.

We now turn to discussing the results and suggesting the limits and perspectives of the present investigation.

5.   Conclusive discussion

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the acquisition of marked word order. It looks specifically at L2 acquisition of French subject inversion in relative clauses by Algerian Arabic speakers in a university setting. A subset of answers to a cloze-test questionnaire comprising post-verbal and preverbal subjects is used, that allows to further test the impact of the animate or inanimate value of the antecedent. In either case, the results show that subject inversion give way to fewer target selection of *que* than those without subject inversion, and at rates that are highly statistically significant in each situation.

The conclusion arising from these is that L2 French learners have a weak command of subject inversion in relatives. They managed 37% of target answers. Note however that this result is practically identical to that of intermediate Norwegian speakers, who displayed 36.8 % of target selection of relative marker *que* with subject inversion. This convergence is puzzling, because whereas Norwegian displays no subject inversion in relative clauses, Algerian Arabic routinely has VSO word order, including in relatives. This would lead us to expect transfer in the second population, and therefore better results. The results should also be better in both populations since they are each exposed to higher registers where such inversions are frequent, following Fuchs (1997) and Abeillé, Hemforth and Winckel (2016). It may be that in fact the Algerian learners, who are in a university environment and indeed a country where vernacular French is well represented, base themselves on their spoken French competence, where the construction is much rarer. This could be tested by submitting questions contrasting data points containing grammatical features of normative and vernacular registers – say inversion or lack of inversion in total interrogatives. Another line of explanation would be based on the idea that subject inversion in relatives involves interpretative values (Pozniak, Abeillé and Hemforth 2021) and that these are difficult to acquire, as shown for Spanish and Italian. The methodological difficulty is finding contexts where these interpretative values are prominent enough to favor post-verbal subjects. If agentivity is key to pre-verbal subjects, examples such

as the following, where subject agentivity is low, should be strange with a preverbal configuration:

(15)   La poussière qu'accumulaient les livres

         'The dust that these books were gathering'

(16)   ?? La poussière que les livres accumulaient

But these are so subtle as to be unlikely to be acquired by learners.

Not directly related to word order proper, a significant impact of the animacy of the antecedent of the relative pronoun is found. There is a clear preference of an inanimate antecedent for direct object relative "que". When the antecedent is inanimate, the target response rate is much higher, be it with inversion (48%) or without it (73%). An animate antecedent brings the difficulty of inversion to the fore, with rates of 46% without inversion and 16% with inversion. Why that is remains unclear. It is true that in other uses, *que* specialises with inanimate referents, in direct questions: "Que voit-il?" cannot mean "Who does he see?", but only "What does he see?". This is paralleled by the behaviour of *qui*, which as a relative preceded by a preposition (a use unavailable to clitic-like *que* that is then replaced by *quoi*) or in an indirect question (again unavailable to *que* replaced by *quoi*) only refers to an animate. The dysharmonic relation of "que" to an animate antecedent thus compounds the difficulty of inversion.

Obviously, the study presented here is based on a method that only covers a part of the competence of learners. It deals with metalinguistic ability to identify the right relative pronoun in a fabricated written sequence under classroom conditions. It is not actual linguistic production, but rather verification of comprehension. It could be argued that the focus on choice of relative pronoun only has a tangential relation to subject inversion, and that the exercise essentially reveals the heuristic rule by learners of inserting a subject relative pronoun in front of a verb that is not preceded by a subject. It could be answered that precisely, this tangential relation removes the collected data from undue attention from learners, reducing the observer's paradox. On the other hand, given the fact that the conditions for subject inversion in relative clauses remain elusive, it is hard to think of a production protocol that would lead learners to use it. Nonetheless, looking at formal writing and at the position of the subject in relatives (other than those introduced by subject *qui*) would be an interesting way to assess whether learners use the construction at a rate that is in any way comparable to native writers. If our assumption is correct that this would be essentially absent but in the most proficient of second-language

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writers, we could conclude, in line with results from this investigation, that learners essentially steer clear of marked word orders. Crucially, there is no transfer from the default L1 word order to a marked L2 word order, because despite superficial similarity, marked word orders associate to particular interpretative values (as per Pozniak, Abeillé and Hemforth 2021) that also need to be learned. It is to be hoped that this generalization about conditions impeding positive transfer of word order will be tested by future research.

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