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# Identifying Phonologically Overt Counterparts to Silent Elements: The Case of French Exceptives

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# Identifying Phonologically Overt Counterparts to Silent Elements: The Case of French Exceptives

## **Abstract**

A relatively recent development in the generative framework is the hypothesis that there exist in syntax silent elements (SEs) that have a semantic content that is recovered by accessing their phonologically overt counterparts (cf. Kayne 2005, 2012 and Her and Tsai 2015, among others). In this paper, we provide a careful assessment of the two SEs that have been argued by O'Neill (2011) and Homer (2015) to be present in the French (ne) ... que exceptive construction; namely silent rien 'nothing' and silent autre 'other'. In doing so, we take to heart one of the main points made by Her and Tsai (2015) in relation to their criticism of Kayne (2012); namely, that for a proposed SE to be learnable, there cannot be any deviation in meaning from its overt counterpart. That is, the recoverability constraint assumed in the generative framework to be at work in, say, PF-deletion ellipsis, applies to all phonologically silent categories, including SEs. Additionally, as Her and Tsai argue, if semantic deviance between SEs and their phonologically overt counterparts were allowed, SEs would become 'empirically intractable'. We argue that while positing a silent n-word in (ne) ... que is faithful to the recoverability constraint on silent categories, the alleged second SE, namely, silent autre 'other', is not semantically equivalent to its phonologically overt counterpart in several respects. As we demonstrate, however, if one assumes instead that its overt counterpart is plus 'more', the recoverability requirement is restored.

# Identifying Phonologically Overt Counterparts to Silent Elements: The Case of French Exceptives

J.-Marc Authier and Lisa A. Reed

## 1 Introduction

A relatively recent development in the generative framework is the hypothesis that there exist in syntax silent elements (SEs) that, unlike elided elements or obligatory control PRO, do not have overt antecedents, but have a semantic content that is recovered by accessing their phonologically overt counterparts in the lexicon (cf. Kayne 2005, 2012 and Her and Tsai 2015, among others). Crucially, as Her and Tsai (2015:580) argue, it is necessary to assume that there is semantic equivalence between SEs and their phonologically overt counterparts, for if semantic deviance were allowed, SEs would become ‘empirically intractable’. In this paper, we examine the claim made by O’Neill (2011) and Homer (2015) that French *(ne)...que* exceptives, illustrated in (1), are ‘hidden comparatives’ that contain two SEs: a silent n-word (*rien* ‘nothing’ or *personne* ‘nobody’) and a silent *autre* ‘other’.

- (1) a. Ils (ne) couperont que les érables.  
they (NEG) will-cut than the maples  
‘They will only cut down the maple trees.’  
b. Nous (ne) recevons que le strict minimum pour nos dépenses de base.  
we (NEG) receive than the bare minimum for our expenditures of support  
‘We get nothing more than the bare minimum to cover our basic financial needs.’

We argue that while there is solid evidence in favor of the correspondence between the former SE and the overt n-word *rien*, assuming that the overt counterpart of the latter is *autre* leads to the kind of semantic deviance shown to be undesirable by Her and Tsai (2015). We propose instead that the overt counterpart to the second silent component of French exceptive *(ne)...que* is *plus* ‘more’ and discuss empirical evidence that shows that overt *plus* and the second silent component of *(ne)...que* display identical semantic properties in a number of contexts in which *autre* fails to do the same.

## 2 Evidence for Silent *rien*

In this section we provide what we believe to be robust evidence in favor of the presence of an SE corresponding to the overt n-word *rien* ‘nothing’ in *ne...que* exceptives.

First, it explains the optional presence of *ne*, since this element is also optionally used in sentences containing an argumental n-word such as the one in (2a). Second, as pointed out by Massicotte (1986), while *(ne)...que* is considered prescriptive in the variety of Canadian French spoken in Montréal, *rien que*, illustrated in (2b), is the most productive exceptive expression in that dialect. Additionally, *(ne)...rien que* competes with *(ne)...que* in other varieties of French, including colloquial European French.

- (2) a. Je (ne) demande rien en retour.  
I (NEG) ask nothing in return  
‘I ask for nothing in return.’  
b. Elle rêve rien que de ça.  
she dreams nothing than of that  
‘She only dreams about that.’

Third, as Gaatone (1999) points out, sentences containing *(ne)...que* display positive polarity and, as shown in (3) and (4), the polarity of a sentence containing *(ne)...rien que* is positive as well.

- (3) a. Elle (ne) rêve que de ça aussi/\*non plus.  
she (NEG) dreams than of that too/\*either
- b. Elle (ne) rêve rien que de ça aussi/\*non plus.  
she (NEG) dreams nothing than of that too/\*either  
'She only dreams about that, too.'
- (4) a. Elle (ne) rêve que de ça non/\*si ?  
she (NEG) dreams than of that no/\*yes
- b. Elle (ne) rêve rien que de ça non/\*si ?  
she (NEG) dreams nothing than of that no/\*yes  
'She only dreams about that, doesn't she?'

Fourth, given that sentential negation *pas* 'not' does not participate in negative concord in European French, the co-occurrence of *pas* with an n-word in the same clause, as in (5a), yields a double negation reading. Interestingly, as (5b) shows, the same is true of the combination *(ne)...pas...que* as well as the combination *(ne)...pas rien que*, suggesting that an n-word is present in both.

- (5) a. Je (ne) demande pas rien en retour.  
I (NEG) ask not nothing in return  
'I do ask for something in return.'
- b. Il (ne) boit pas (rien) que de l'eau.  
he (NEG) drinks not (nothing) than of the-water  
'He drinks more than just water.'

Fifth, as shown in (6a), French sentences with two clause-mate n-words give rise to either a negative concord (NC) reading or a double negation (DN) reading. Interestingly, as Homer (2015) points out, the same readings obtain if an n-word and a *(ne)...que* exceptive are clause-mates (6b) and, as we have also illustrated in (6b), both readings are available with *(ne)...rien que* in the same context as well. This is, of course, expected if *(ne)...que* exceptives contain a silent n-word. It is also worth noting that an exceptive adverb like *seulement* 'only', which is *not* an n-word, does not trigger negative concord readings. Thus, (7) contrasts with (6b).

- (6) a. Personne (ne) pense à rien.  
nobody (NEG) thinks at anything  
*NC reading*: 'Nobody is thinking about anything.'  
*DN reading*: 'Everybody is thinking about something.'
- b. Personne (ne) boit (rien) que de l'eau.  
nobody (NEG) drinks (nothing) than of the-water  
*NC reading*: 'Nobody drinks anything but water.'  
*DN reading*: 'Everybody drinks more than just water.'
- (7) Personne (ne) boit seulement de l'eau.  
nobody (NEG) drinks only of the-water  
*DN reading only*: 'Everybody drinks more than just water.'

Sixth, as illustrated in (8), argumental *rien*, being a quantificational head, can raise to pre-participial position, a movement that is arguably an instance of overt QR. Interestingly, the *rien* that can appear overtly in *(ne)...que* exceptives displays similar characteristics in colloquial registers. Thus, alongside the in situ *rien* in (9a), one finds the pre-participial *rien* in (9b).

- (8) Je (n') ai rien lu d'intéressant.  
I (NEG) have nothing read of-interesting  
'I haven't read anything interesting.'
- (9) a. Je (n') ai mangé rien que quelques dates.  
I (NEG) have eaten nothing than a-few dates
- b. Je (n') ai rien mangé que quelques dates.  
I (NEG) have nothing eaten than a-few dates  
'I only ate a few dates.'

Finally, in colloquial styles, argumental *rien* can also raise out of an infinitival clause and into a tensed matrix containing a modal, as in (10). This is also possible with *ne...rien que* and the two possible c-command relations for *rien* with respect to the modal result in different readings, as (11) illustrates.

- (10) Je (ne) suis rien obligé de te donner.  
I (NEG) am nothing obliged of you to-give  
'I don't have to give you anything.'
- (11) a. On est obligé de **ne rien** boire **que** de l'eau.  
we are obliged of NEG nothing to-drink than of the-water  
'We are required to only drink water.'  
b. On **n'est rien** obligé de boire **que** de l'eau.  
we NEG-are nothing obliged of to-drink than of the-water  
'We are only required to drink water.'

In (11a) and (11b), *ne* and *rien* are clausemates; that is, *ne*, in some sense, marks the scope of *rien*. Further, in (11a), the deontic modal expression *être obligé* 'be required' c-commands *rien* and therefore scopes over it, yielding an interpretation according to which one is required to drink water and nothing else. In (11b), on the other hand, *rien* c-commands the modal and takes wide scope over it, yielding an interpretation according to which all one is required to drink is water (that is, one is free to drink other things such as wine, though it is not required). The latter reading is known as the 'minimal sufficiency reading', a topic to which we return in the next section.

Now, if (*ne*)...*que* contains an SE corresponding to overt *rien*, we expect similar readings to be available and, if *ne* is expressed, we expect it to 'reveal' the scope of the SE and select one reading or the other, depending on its position. These are indeed the right predictions, as the paradigm in (12) shows. That is, while (12a) is, in the absence of *ne*, ambiguous between the two readings associated with (11a) and (11b), (12b) only has the reading available in (11a) and (12c) the reading available in (11b).

- (12) a. On est obligé de boire que de l'eau.  
we are obliged of to-drink than of the-water  
b. On est obligé de **ne** boire que de l'eau.  
we are obliged of NEG to-drink than of the-water  
c. On **n'est** obligé de boire que de l'eau.  
we NEG-are obliged of to-drink than of the-water

So far, we have seen cases in which *ne* signals that *rien*, be it overt or covert, undergoes raising to the periphery of the vP projection. Let us go one step further and hypothesize that this instance of head movement of *rien*, which strands the *que* + *XP*, is akin to the well-known cases of Quantification at a Distance (QAD), which, as Authier (2016) argues, involve head movement of degree quantifiers like *beaucoup* 'a lot', as well. Thus, the QAD configuration in (13b) is derived from its canonical quantification counterpart in (13a).

- (13) a. On a mangé beaucoup de frites.  
we have eaten a-lot of fries  
b. On a beaucoup mangé de frites.  
we have a-lot eaten of fries  
'We ate a lot of fries.'

As has been noted in the literature, QAD is unavailable in at least four basic configurations: from the subject position of a tensed clause, as in (14a), from within a PP, as in (14b), from the object position of an ECM clausal complement if movement is to the matrix vP-field, as in (14c); and from within a complex DP, as in (14d). (We refer the reader to Authier 2016, who uses these facts to support a movement analysis of QAD.)

- (14) a. \*De fourmis ont beaucoup envahi ma cuisine.  
of ants have a-lot invaded my kitchen  
(Cf. Beaucoup de fourmis ont envahi ma cuisine.)  
‘A lot of ants have invaded my kitchen.’
- b. \*Elle a beaucoup tiré sur de bouteilles.  
she has a-lot shot on of bottles  
(Cf. Elle a tiré sur beaucoup de bouteilles.)  
‘She shot at a lot of bottles.’
- c. \*Elle a beaucoup vu Alfonso cuisiner de nouilles.  
she has a-lot seen Alfonso cook of noodles  
(Cf. Elle a vu Alfonso cuisiner beaucoup de nouilles.)  
‘She’s seen Alfonso cook a lot of noodles.’
- d. \*Ils ont beaucoup commandé un gâteau avec de marbrures.  
they have a-lot ordered a cake with of marbling  
(Cf. Ils ont commandé un gâteau avec beaucoup de marbrures.)  
‘They ordered a cake with a lot of marbling.’

Interestingly, *ne...rien...que* with *rien* having undergone head movement is prohibited in exactly the same contexts, as (15) illustrates.

- (15) a. \*Que deux cyclistes n’ont rien franchi la ligne d’arrivée.  
than two cyclists NEG-have nothing crossed the line of-arrival  
‘Only two cyclists crossed the finish line.’
- b. \*Il n’a rien cuisiné avec que des produits frais.  
he NEG-has nothing cooked with than of products fresh  
‘He cooked with only fresh ingredients.’
- c. \*Elle n’a rien vu les flèches atteindre que deux cibles.  
she NEG-has nothing seen the arrows reach than two targets  
‘She saw the arrows hit only two targets.’
- d. \*Ils n’ont rien vu un arbre décoré avec que des guirlandes.  
they NEG-have nothing seen a tree decorated with than some garlands  
‘They saw a tree decorated with only tinsel.’

The sentences in (15) can, however, be redeemed if *rien* does not undergo QAD and *ne* is obligatorily absent. This is illustrated in (16). (Note that in (16c) *ne* is possible, but only in the ECM complement.)

- (16) a. Rien que deux cyclistes ont franchi la ligne d’arrivée.  
nothing than two cyclists have crossed the line of-arrival  
‘Only two cyclists crossed the finish line.’
- b. Il a cuisiné avec rien que des produits frais.  
he has cooked with nothing than of products fresh  
‘He cooked with only fresh ingredients.’
- c. Elle (\*n’)a vu les flèches (n’) atteindre rien que deux cibles.  
she (\*NEG)has seen the arrows (NEG) to-reach nothing than two targets  
‘She saw the arrows hit only two targets.’
- d. Ils ont vu un arbre décoré avec rien que des guirlandes.  
they have seen a tree decorated with nothing than some garlands  
‘They saw a tree decorated with only tinsel.’

Taken together, the paradigms in (15) and (16) suggest that *ne* is optionally present in exceptives only if overt or SE *rien* undergoes QAD either in the overt syntax or post-Spell-Out. This explains the contrast between (16b), which is ungrammatical with *ne* and (17), in which *ne* is possible, due to the fact that *rien* is external to the PP.

- (17) Il (n')a cuisiné rien qu'avec des produits frais.  
 he (NEG)-has cooked nothing than-with of products fresh  
 'He only cooked with fresh ingredients.'

Thus, the term “(ne)...*que* exceptives” is somewhat of a misnomer, since what we are dealing with here is (*rien*) *que* exceptives where the optional presence of *ne* signals the scope assigned to overt or covert *rien* via Quantification at a Distance in those contexts where such a movement is possible.

We turn next to the second hypothesized SE in (*ne*)...*que* constructions, namely covert *autre* ‘other’.

### 3 Positing a Silent *autre* Leads to Undesirable Consequences

French (*ne*)...*que* exceptives, just like *only* and *just* in English, are standardly assumed to give rise to two distinct components of meaning: the asserted (or at-issue) component and the semantically presupposed prejacent. To illustrate what these terms refer to, consider the sentences in (18).

- (18) a. Nous (n')avons invité que Sandrine.  
 we (NEG)-have invited than Sandrine  
 'We only invited Sandrine.'  
 b. Nous (n')avons pas invité que Sandrine.  
 we (NEG)-have not invited than Sandrine  
 'We didn't just invite Sandrine.'

The sentence in (18a) contributes the semantic assertion that it is not the case that we invited anyone out of a relevant set of individuals of which Sandrine is not a member. We know this to be the assertoric content of (18a) because negating (18a), as in (18b), reverses the truth value of the proposition: (18b) asserts that it *is* the case that we invited someone out of a relevant set of individuals of which Sandrine is not a member. The second aspect of meaning associated with (18a) is the inference that we invited Sandrine. This inference is called the prejacent. This aspect of meaning is widely (though not universally) assumed to be a semantic presupposition because it also arises in conjunction with the negated version of (18a), namely (18b).

With this in mind, we turn to the hypothesis, defended by both O'Neill (2011) and Homer (2015) that (*ne*)...*que* constructions contain a silent *autre* ‘other’, which introduces the comparative complementizer *que* ‘than’. In other words, according to them, (*ne*)...*que* is really (*ne*)...*rien/personne d'autre que*, which means that they take a sentence like (19a) to be the minimal phonological realization of (19b), the total realization.

- (19) a. Il (n')a mangé **que** du pain. MINIMAL REALIZATION  
 he (NEG)-has eaten than of-the bread  
 'He only ate some bread.'  
 b. Il (n')a mangé **rien d'autre que** du pain. TOTAL REALIZATION  
 he (NEG)-has eaten nothing of-other than of-the bread  
 'He ate nothing other than bread.'

However, as Homer (2015) points out, there is an important difference between such minimal and total realizations, one that is linked to the presence of the prejacent. That is, the prejacent is an obligatory inference in minimal realizations but not in total ones. To see this, consider the discourse in (20).

- (20) I don't know if Aline called Johann but I'm sure that...  
 a. #...elle n'a appelé que Johann.  
 '...she only called Johann.'  
 b. ...elle n'a appelé personne d'autre que Johann.  
 '...she called no one other than Johann.'

Given the discourse background spelled out in English in (20), the infelicitous continuation in (20a), which involves the minimal realization of *(ne)...que*, is due the obligatory presence of the inference that Aline called Johann (which is the prejacent). Unexpectedly, however, the alleged total realization of *(ne)...que* in (20b) is felicitous in the same context, which indicates that it does not (or at least not necessarily) yield the same inference.

There is an additional problem tied to the assumption that total realizations contain *autre*, one that has so far gone unnoticed in the literature, as far as we know. It has to do with the fact that total realizations with *autre* appear to systematically enforce a complement exclusion reading in those cases where a rank-order reading or a minimal sufficiency reading of the minimal realization of *(ne)...que* is observed. Let us examine these two cases in some detail.

The issue of rank-order readings has been discussed in the context of English *only* by Coppock and Beaver (2011, 2013). Just like *only*, *(ne)...que* displays, in most cases, a complement exclusion reading as in (21), but it also does, in some cases, take on a so-called rank-order reading, for example in predicative sentences like (22).

- (21) Paul (n')aime que Véro.  
Paul (NEG)-loves than Véro  
'Paul loves only Véro.'
- (22) Paul n'est que lieutenant.  
Paul (NEG)-is than first-lieutenant  
'Paul is only a first lieutenant.'

A sentence like (21) displays a 'complement exclusion reading' in the sense that the complement of the singleton set {Véro} is excluded from the property of being loved by Paul. Thus, the assertoric component of (21) can be paraphrased as *Paul loves no one other than Véro*. The predicative sentence in (22), on the other hand, does not say that Paul has no relevant properties other than being a first lieutenant; it says that Paul has no relevant properties that place him higher than first lieutenant on the scale of army ranks. This is the so-called rank-order reading. A theory of *(ne)...que* should, of course, have the ability to allow sentences like (22) to not be paraphrased with *nothing other than*. Unfortunately, the maximal realization of *(ne)...que* proposed by O'Neill (2011) and Homer (2015) does not have that ability; that is, the alleged maximal realization containing *rien d'autre que* in (23), does not have the same interpretation as its minimal realization counterpart in (22).

- (23) Paul n'est rien d'autre que lieutenant.  
Paul (NEG)-is nothing of-other than first-lieutenant  
'Paul is nothing other than a first lieutenant.'

While *rien* in (23) is certainly subject to domain restriction, its domain is not necessarily restricted to those properties that are army ranks, thus deriving the rank-order scale. Rather, (23), unlike its minimal realization counterpart in (22), allows for a reading whereby Paul has no other property than being first lieutenant out of a set of relevant properties that can include such properties as being a father, being a talented singer, etc.

The other reading sometimes associated with *(ne)...que* has previously been discussed in the context of English *just* by Grosz (2012), Coppock and Beaver (2014) and Coppock and Lindahl (2014). On this reading, *(ne)...que* again fails to take on a complement exclusion reading. It instead displays what Grosz (2012) calls a 'minimal sufficiency reading'. The sentence in (24) illustrates the phenomenon in French.

- (24) Rien que l'idée de travailler l'épuise.  
nothing than the-idea of to-work him-exhausts  
'Just the thought of working exhausts him.'

The example in (24) does not have the complement exclusion inference that nothing other than the idea of working exhausts him. It implies instead that at least the idea of working exhausts him (i.e., that's all it takes), which is the minimal sufficiency reading. The alleged maximal realization of (24)



containing *rien d'autre que* in (25) does not, however, yield this interpretation. That is, (25), unlike (24), does have the complement exclusion inference that the thought of working is the only thing that exhausts him.

- (25) Rien d'autre que l'idée de travailler l'épuise.  
 nothing-of-other than the-idea of to-work him-exhausts  
 'Nothing other than the thought of working exhausts him.'

To remedy these shortcomings, we argue next that a more likely candidate for the second SE present in the *(ne)...que* construction is covert *plus* 'more'.

#### 4 A New Candidate for the Second SE

As pointed out in the literature, by for instance von Stechow & Iatridou (2007), French exceptive *(ne)...que*, has correlates in other languages, for example, in Spanish. As it turns out, Spanish exceptives like the one in (26) are similar to their French counterparts in having as a 'first component' an overt or covert n-word; namely *nada* 'nothing'. In addition, Spanish obligatorily spells out the 'second component' as *más* 'more'.

- (26) Sofia **no** comió (**nada**) **más que** alitas de pollo.  
 Sofia not ate (nothing) more than wings of chicken  
 'Sofia only ate chicken wings.'

Interestingly, French can also spell out the second component of *(ne)...que* as *plus* 'more', as in (27), though French differs minimally from Spanish in that the presence of overt *plus* is contingent upon *rien* being phonologically spelled out.

- (27) Sophie (n')a mangé **rien de plus que** des ailes de poulet.  
 Sophie (NEG)-has eaten nothing of more than some wings of chicken  
 'Sophie only ate chicken wings.'

Could it then be that *(ne)...rien de plus que* rather than *(ne)...rien d'autre que* is the maximal realization of *(ne)...que* exceptives? As we will now demonstrate, the evidence suggests that the answer to this question is positive.

First, unlike *(ne)...rien d'autre que*, *(ne)...rien de plus que* does not exhibit Homer's prejacent problem. To see this, consider the discourse in (28).

- (28) I don't know if Sophie ate chicken wings but I'm sure that...  
 a. #...elle n'a mangé que des ailes de poulet.  
 '...she only ate chicken wings.'  
 b. #...elle n'a mangé rien de plus que des ailes de poulet.  
 '...she ate nothing more than chicken wings.'

Given the discourse background spelled out in English in (28), the infelicitous continuation in (28a), which involves the minimal realization of *(ne)...que*, reveals the obligatory presence of the inference that Sophie ate chicken wings (the prejacent). But notice now that the new hypothesized total realization of *(ne)...que* in (28b) is infelicitous as well, from which we conclude that it yields the same inference. This immediately solves Homer's prejacent problem.

Second, unlike *(ne)...rien d'autre que*, *(ne)...rien de plus que* yields both the rank-order and the minimal sufficiency readings of *(ne)...que* and does so in the appropriate contexts. To see this, consider the examples in (29).

- (29) a. Paul (n')est rien de plus que lieutenant.  
 Paul (NEG)-is nothing of more than first-lieutenant  
 'Paul is nothing more than a first lieutenant.'

- b. Rien de plus que l'idée de travailler l'épuise.  
 nothing of more than the-idea of to-work him-exhausts  
 'Nothing more than the thought of working exhausts him.'

Just like its minimal realization counterpart in (22), (29a) does not say that Paul has no relevant properties other than being a first lieutenant; it says that Paul has no relevant properties that are higher than being a first lieutenant on the army officer ranking scale. In a similar vein, (29b) mimics its minimal realization (*ne*)...*que* counterpart in (24) in that it does not have the complement exclusion inference that nothing but the thought of working exhausts him. It implies instead that at least the thought of working exhausts him, which is the minimal sufficiency reading.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have provided a careful assessment of the two SEs that have been argued by O'Neill (2011) and Homer (2015) to be present in the minimal realization of the French (*ne*)...*que* construction. In doing so, we have taken to heart one of the main points made by Her and Tsai (2015) in relation to their criticism of Kayne (2012); namely, that for a proposed SE to be learnable, there cannot be any deviation in meaning from its overt counterpart. In other words, the recoverability constraint assumed in the generative framework to be at work in, say, PF-deletion ellipsis, applies to all phonologically silent categories, including SEs. We came to the conclusion that positing a silent n-word in (*ne*)...*que* is indeed faithful to this constraint. But the alleged second SE, silent *autre*, was shown not to be semantically equivalent to its phonologically overt counterpart in several respects. As we demonstrated, however, if one assumes instead that its overt counterpart is *plus*, the recoverability requirement is restored.

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