

The distribution of *IL* and *CE* in French copular sentences: semantic and informational aspects

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This paper deals with the influence of information structure on the use of the French personal pronoun *IL* and the demonstrative pronoun *CE* in copular sentences. On the basis of a corpus study, it shows that *IL* is likely to mark topic continuity in the vast majority (88%) of the examples. The results for *CE* appear to be less clear-cut as *CE* is used in a wider variety of constellations (it can be used with or without concrete antecedent, it appears quite often in dislocated structures). However, overall, the different results converge and show that *CE* is often likely to function as a topic shift marker.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with the influence of information structure on the use of the French personal pronoun *IL* and demonstrative pronoun *CE*¹ in copular sentences. More specifically its aim is to verify whether *IL* can be correlated with topic continuity and *CE* with topic shift.

First the more traditional, semantic-pragmatic views on the use of *IL* and *CE* in copular sentences will be presented. Section 3 briefly goes over some informational properties that have been ascribed to *IL* and demonstrative anaphora in general. Section 4 spells out the research questions and gives some methodological information regarding the corpus and the criteria of analysis. Section 5 discusses the major findings.

¹ We use capitals to indicate that we take into account all forms of the pronouns: *il(s)*, *elle(s)*, *ce*, *c'* and *ça*.

2. *IL/CE* and copular sentences

The use of *IL* and *CE*, respectively, as pronominal subject in copular sentences has often been linked to the semantic-pragmatic interpretation of the sentence as a whole. Traditionally (cf. Kupfermann 1979, Boone 1987, etc.), *IL* is associated with predicational sentences as in (1), whereas *CE* is linked to identificational ones, illustrated by (2):

- (1) **Il est** linguiste. (Van Peteghem 1991: 30)
'He is a linguist.'
- (2) **C'est** un linguiste. (ibid.)
'He is a linguist.'²

Predicational sentences combine an entirely referential entity with a (non referential) predicate, whose sole function is to characterize (or qualify) the referential entity. Identificational sentences are used to identify the referent of the syntactic subject, which is unknown to the interlocutor. They typically answer questions of the type "Who/what is X?".

One can add to this traditional account that *CE* is the only possible pronoun in definitions (see ex. 3) and in presentational sentences (see ex. 4):

- (3) Qu'est-ce qu'un remugle ? Un remugle, **c'est** une odeur de renfermé.
(Riegel 1987: 46)
'What is a "remugle"? A "remugle", **it is** an odor of mustiness.'
- (4) Dans son dos, **c'étaient** des hurlements: Volia distribuait des taloches.
(Van Peteghem 1991: 132)
'Behind his back, **there were** howlings: Volia was dealing out hard blows.'

Furthermore, Van Peteghem (1991) objected to the traditional view that *CE* is not excluded from predicational sentences. The demonstrative actually appears quite often, as in (5) and (6). Example (5) also highlights that in some cases both *IL* and *CE* can occur.

² *CE* being a demonstrative, its literal translation is *that/this (one)*. However, we have chosen to translate the examples more freely in order to obtain more natural sounding English equivalents.

- (5) Charley Brown courait de toutes ses forces. **IL/C'**était un pirate désormais et il serrait son butin dans ses bras. (Boone 1998: 74)
'Charley Brown ran as hard as he could. **HE was** a pirate from now on and he held his loot tight.'
- (6) Vous avez des scientifiques parmi vos amis. Que pensent-ils d'André ?
– Que **c'est** un très grand savant. (Van Peteghem 1991: 125)
'You have scientists among your friends. What do they think of André? – That **he is** a great scholar.'

According to Van Peteghem (1991), the use of either *IL* or *CE* crucially depends on the 'commitment' of the speaker: when using *IL*, the speaker presents the qualification expressed by the predicate as objective information, which the interlocutor will accept without any objections. The use of *CE*, on the contrary, signals a strong commitment on behalf of the speaker. The context of example (5) allows both interpretations, whereas the context in (6) imposes the strong commitment reading.

Another point of view is defended by Boone (1998). She explains the difference between copular sentences with *IL* and *CE* by referring to characteristics specific to *IL* and *CE*. According to her, *IL* implies some kind of semantic continuity (see also Kleiber 1994), whereas *CE* is related to the notion of shift. She claims that the pronoun *CE* produces an external classification that installs the referent as an object among other objects.³

We retain from this description the notions of continuity and shift, which are commonly used in information structure (IS) studies. However, as used by Boone (and Kleiber), these notions do not cover a real informational load.⁴ Our aim, then, is to verify whether continuity and shift, in an informational sense, are factors that help to explain the use of *IL* and *CE* in copular sentences.

3. Informational properties of personal pronouns and demonstratives

According to Lambrecht (1994), unaccented pronouns (which include *IL* and *CE*) are preferred topic expressions. This implies that a referent is topical when it is referred to by *IL* or *CE*. Moreover, unaccented pronouns have also been

³ "Le référent à classer est pris en dehors de toute situation saillante, comme un objet externe à qui l'on assigne une place au sein des catégories ou classes" (Kleiber 1994: 96, in Boone 1998: 75)

⁴ According to Kleiber (1994) topic continuity is neither a prerequisite nor a sufficient condition for the use of *IL*.

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characterized as topic continuity markers. For instance, the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel *et al.* 1993) links topic continuity to the cognitive status of referents. It is claimed that personal pronouns, such as *IL*, refer to entities that are in the centre of attention.⁵ These are activated entities with topic status in the preceding utterance (i.e. they are what the utterance is about), which are also “likely to be continued as topics of subsequent utterances” (ibid.: 279). Following this interpretation, topic continuity occurs if the topic of a given sentence was the topic of the previous sentence and *IL* is a topic continuity marker.

On the other hand, scholars such as Himmelmann (1996), Diessel (1999) and Comrie (2000) describe how demonstratives of various kinds in several languages signal a shift of some kind, such as a shift in the centre of attention or a topic shift. According to the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel *et al.* 1993), the use of a demonstrative normally signals that the referent is activated and hence is situated in short term memory, but is not yet in the centre of attention, i.e. it was not the topic of the previous utterance. Demonstratives thus signal a shift in the centre of attention and, consequently, a topic shift. Evidence for this in French is provided by Demol (2007). This corpus-study of *IL* and *CELUI-CI* shows that *IL* marks topic continuity in 65% of the examples, whereas *CELUI-CI* marks a topic shift in 64% of the examples. To our knowledge, there are no similar studies of *CE*.

4. Research questions and methodology

We applied these IS accounts of personal pronouns and demonstratives to the pronouns *IL* and *CE* in copular sentences. More specifically, we verified in a corpus of copular sentences whether *IL* marks topic continuity (i.e. refers to the topic of the previous sentence) and *CE* a topic shift.

The corpus has been compiled in two steps. First, all copular sentences of the type ‘*IL/CE* + copular verb + nominal predicate’ have been retrieved from articles published in *Le Monde* between September 22 and September 30 (2006). The total number of words for these 8 days (note that there are no articles for September 24) amounts to about 496,500. All copular verbs have been taken into account and all moods and tenses were included as well as all forms of *IL* (*il, ils,*

⁵ Gundel *et al.* (1993) use the term “in focus” (i.e. in the focus of attention) to refer to the entities that are in the centre of attention. Within the Givenness Hierarchy, the term “focus” therefore does not carry an informational load and should not be confused with the informational notion of focus as it has been defined by Lambrecht (1994).

elle, elles) and *CE* (*ce, c', ça*). With respect to the predicate, bare NPs, pre-modified NPs (with definite or indefinite determiners) and proper names were taken into account. We ended up with 161 examples of *IL* and 377 examples of *CE*.

The occurrences of *CE* belong to three different sub-types. A first group contains 142 examples of *CE* with a concrete antecedent that can be analyzed (as was the case in examples 5 and 6). It should be noted that it is these examples that should be compared to those of *IL*, for which there normally is a concrete antecedent.

A second group contains 212 examples of *CE* without a concrete antecedent. It consists of several subtypes:

1. *CE* occurs at the very beginning of the article:

- (7) “**C'est** l'heure des choix.” L'expression rageuse d'un proche de Robert Hue résume l'ambiance tendue qu'a connue la coupole du Colonel-Fabien, siège du PCF. (*Le Monde*, 30 September 2006)
“**It is** the time to make choices.” The furious expression of a close colleague of R. Hue summarizes the nervous atmosphere at the “coupole of Colonel-Fabien”, the headquarters of the PCF.’

2. *CE* is used cataphorically:

- (8) **C'est** une première: France 2 proposera, courant octobre, un documentaire consacré au président de la République [...]. (*Le Monde*, 27 September 2006)
‘**It is** a first: France 2 proposes, in October, a documentary on the President of France.’

3. *CE* occurs in a presentational (or existential) structure:

- (9) Entre 1945 et 1955, la Cinémathèque connaît son heure de gloire, et Langlois devient une référence internationale. Puis **c'est** l’“affaire Langlois”, qui débute le 9 février 1968 [...]. (*Le Monde*, 29 September 2006)
‘Between 1945 and 1955, it is a glorious moment for the Cinémathèque (movie library) and Langlois is becoming an international reference. Then the “Langlois affair” breaks out (then **it is** the “Langlois affair”), starting on February 9th 1968.’

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4. The antecedent has to be established by inference:

- (10) [...] Quand j'écris sur l'Afghanistan ou l'Irak, rapidement je retrouve mes repères. **Ce sont** des musulmans, des Bédouins, comme moi et leurs villages ressemblent à ceux du Sahara algérien. (*Le Monde*, 29 September 2006)
'When I write about Afghanistan or Irak, I rapidly retrace my landmarks. **They are** Muslims, Bedouins, just like me, and their villages resemble those of the Algerian Sahara.'

5. It is difficult to determine which element of the preceding co-text functions as antecedent:

- (11) Ces dispositifs doivent trouver leur équilibre interne soit en diminuant les prestations, soit en augmentant les recettes - que **CE soit** le montant ou la durée des cotisations. (*Le Monde*, 26 September 2006)
'These measures have to find their internal balance, either by reducing the benefits or by increasing the receipts – whether **it is** (by reducing) the amount or the duration of the benefits.'

6. *CE* refers to some clause or proposition or to some propositional content:

- (12) – La partie individuelle ne pourrait-elle pas être privatisée ?
- **C'est** un autre débat. [...] (*Le Monde*, 26 September 2006)
'- Wouldn't it be possible to privatize the individual part ?
- **That's** another discussion.'

Finally, the third group contains 23 examples of *CE* occurring in a specificational sentence, illustrated by example (13):

- (13) [...] Notre principale préoccupation, **c'est** le succès de ce projet. [...].
'Our main concern **is** the success of the project.' (*Le Monde*, 30 September 2006)

In these specificational copulars the first NP (i.e. the predicate) is often dislocated and immediately repeated by the pronoun *CE*. These sentences do not have topic-comment structure, but have argument focus (cf. Lambrecht 1994) on

the subject, which corresponds to the NP situated on the right of the copula.⁶ Moreover, the inversion of the predicate and the subject makes it harder to determine what actually functions as antecedent. Therefore, it makes no sense to analyze the topicality of the antecedent or to verify if there is topic continuity.

Step two in the compilation of the corpus consisted in retrieving from the articles published in *Le Monde* between September 14 and September 21 (2006) the examples of copular sentences preceded by a concrete antecedent. In total (September 14-30, 2006) 226 examples of *IL* and 233 examples of *CE* with concrete antecedent have been found in a corpus of about 919,000 words. All additional occurrences of specificational sentences were also retained, giving a total of 55 examples.

The corpus allowed us to examine whether the antecedent of *IL* is a topic in the sentence in which it appears and whether the antecedent of *CE* is non-topical. Remember that following Lambrecht, unaccented pronouns, such as *IL* and *CE*, are themselves topic expressions. With respect to the antecedent, typical correlates of topic status, such as syntactic function - subjecthood being correlated with topichood - and syntactic category, have been examined. These will be further commented on in the following sections.

5. Results

5.1. *Information structure when there is no concrete antecedent*

When *CE* refers to a clause or to some propositional content (see example 12), the antecedent is propositional in nature. Therefore, it has no clear referential status: the content of the proposition is only established as a discourse referent or discourse object by the use of the demonstrative pronoun (see Konsten *et al.* 2007). Consequently, it is also difficult to determine the informational status of such antecedents. Clausally introduced entities do not have topic status yet, but can become topics in subsequent discourse according to Gundel *et al.* (2003). In other words, demonstratives make a topic out of the clausally introduced entity and by doing so operate a kind of topic shift.

More in general, when there is no antecedent or no clear antecedent, *CE* can be said to mark a topic shift: since there is no clear antecedent, there is no previous

⁶ In French, the *it*-cleft construction (*c'est ... qui ...*) indeed allows to retrieve the syntactic subject of the sentence: *C'est le succès de ce projet qui est notre principale préoccupation.*

mention of the referent with topic status. But the referent clearly has topic status when it is referred to by *CE*. Therefore *CE* also operates a topic shift in these cases.

5.2. Information structure when *IL/CE* have a concrete antecedent

5.2.1. Position of the antecedent and left detachment

According to our hypothesis, the subject of the copular sentence can only be considered a continuous topic if the antecedent also has topic status. However, this hypothesis is only applicable to the examples where the antecedent occurs in the same sentence as *IL/CE* or in the sentence immediately preceding the copular sentence. If the sentence containing the antecedent is separated from the copular sentence by another sentence (which probably has its own sentence topic), it should be concluded that there is an interruption of the ‘topic continuity chain’. The analysis of the topic status of the antecedent will therefore be limited to the examples where the antecedent appears in the same sentence as *IL/CE* or in the sentence preceding the copular sentence. This is the case in 91% of the examples of *IL* and in 88% of the examples of *CE*.

With respect to the examples where *IL/CE* and their antecedent are located in one and the same sentence, one series of examples deserve special treatment, because they can easily be explained from an informational viewpoint and do not need to be further examined. These examples concern dislocated structures, as in example (14):

- (14) **Le créole, c'est** la langue des maîtres appréhendée par des oreilles africaines et restituée par des gosiers africains [...]. (*Le Monde*, 28 September 2006)
'Creole, **that is** the language of the masters understood by African ears and reproduced by African throats.'

The data reveal an important difference between *IL* and *CE*: only 2% (i.e. 5 out of 266) of the examples with *IL* display a dislocated structure, whereas this amounts to 20% (i.e. 41 out of 205) of the examples with *CE*. Hence, our data confirm the observation made by Barnes (1985), whose corpus study indeed shows that the dislocation of the NP subject is a lot more frequent in copular sentences taking *CE* than in those taking *IL* as pronominal subject. From an informational point of view, this difference between *CE* and *IL* is interesting, because left detachment is generally analyzed as a structure used to establish a

new topic or a shift in the topic of the discourse (Lambrecht 1994). The frequency of dislocated structures being higher for *CE* than for *IL*, this seems to be a first argument in favor of our hypothesis that *CE* marks a topic shift and *IL* topic continuity.

In the remainder of this paper, the analysis of the informational status of the antecedent will only concentrate on the examples without dislocation, where the antecedent appears in the same sentence as *IL/CE* or in the sentence preceding the copular sentence. In order to evaluate the topic status of the antecedent, we used two series of quantitative measures: the first one concerns the syntactic category and the second the syntactic function of the antecedent. Both measures present an (imperfect) correlation with topichood. First, the results for both measures will be commented on separately. Second, some correlations between them will be looked at.

5.2.2. *Syntactic category of the antecedent*

Our analysis is based on the idea that topic status correlates, albeit imperfectly, with the cognitive status of referents and with certain referential expressions: highly activated or accessible referents are excellent candidates for topichood. Ariel (1990) claims (cf. among others, Givón 1983) that referential expressions are mainly chosen according to the degree of accessibility they mark. She makes a distinction between Low Accessibility Markers (LAM, these are definite and indefinite NPs and proper Ns), Intermediate Accessibility Markers (IAM, which consist of all kinds of demonstrative expressions) and High Accessibility Markers (HAM, these contain stressed pronouns, unstressed pronouns, and zero anaphora). HAM are thus preferred topic expressions.

Table 1 shows how often the antecedent of *IL* and *CE* is a HAM on the one hand and a LAM on the other (there are no examples of IAM). *IL* appears in 63% of the examples with an antecedent expressed by a HAM (such as zero anaphora and unaccented pronouns), whereas *CE* occurs in 59% of the data with an antecedent expressed by a definite or indefinite NP, i.e. a LAM. So there is a slight preference of *IL* for HAM and of *CE* for LAM, even if the gap between the percentages does not seem to be very important. The difference nevertheless proved to be statistically significant when the CHI-SQUARE test was applied (CHI-2 = 17.27, for 1 degree of freedom, the critical value at a significance level of 0.001 must be at least 10.93). Consequently, the antecedent of *IL* appears more often as a successful candidate for topic status than the antecedent of *CE*.

	IL		CE	
HAM	150	63%	56	41%
LAM	87	37%	82	59%
	237	100%	138	100%

Table 1: Syntactic category of the antecedent

5.2.3. Syntactic function of the antecedent

The second measure used to verify topic status is related to the syntactic function of the antecedent. More specifically, we contrasted the cases where the antecedent functions as syntactic subject with the remaining cases, since subjecthood is generally considered as another strong (but again imperfect) correlate of topichood (cf. Lambrecht 1994).

The data in table 2 show that the antecedent of both *IL* and *CE* is in the majority of the examples a subject. However the percentage of antecedents with subject function is higher for *IL* (70%) than for *CE* (53%). Again, the difference does not appear to be that important, but actually is statistically significant (CHI-Square = 10.36; > critical value for 0.01 significance level = 6.64 for 1 df).

	IL		CE	
subject	166	70%	73	53%
non subject	71	30%	65	47%
	237	100%	138	100%

Table 2: Syntactic function of the antecedent

The results for both measures allow us to conclude that the antecedent is more likely to be topical in the case of *IL* compared to *CE*: it appears more often in subject position and is expressed more often by a HAM. This supports the hypothesis that *IL* more often tends to mark topic continuity and *CE* a topic shift.

5.2.4. Correlation between syntactic function and syntactic category

We know that zero pronouns, unaccented pronouns and possessive determiners (*son, sa, ses*) are considered as preferred topic expressions (cf. Lambrecht 1994): if the antecedent pertains to one of these categories, their referents can with certainty be labeled as topical referents.

Referents mentioned by definite elements such as accented pronouns, definite NPs and proper names are not excluded from topichood, but they can also be in

focus. For these examples, it is useful to examine also the syntactic function of the referential expression and, more specifically, to verify in how many cases these definite expressions have the function of subject. Since subjects are very valuable candidates for the status of topichood, the probability for accented pronouns, definite NPs and proper names to be interpreted as topics increases if they are used in subject function.

Table 3 thus presents a more integrated account: antecedents are more likely to be interpreted as topical if they are expressed either by a preferred topical expression, or by an accented pronoun, a definite NP, or a proper noun provided these are used in subject function:

	IL	CE	IL	CE
more likely topic continuity			87,8%	67,4%
Preferred topical expression	145	55		
subject	102	32	43,0%	23,2%
non-subject	43	23	18,1%	16,7%
def NP subject	29	30	12,2%	21,7%
accented pro subject	2	1	0,8%	0,7%
proper N subject	32	7	13,5%	5,1%
more likely topic shift			12,2%	32,6%
indef NP				
subject	1	3	0,4%	2,2%
non-subject	1	6	0,4%	4,3%
def NP non-subject	12	29	5,1%	21,0%
accented pro non-subject	3	0	1,3%	0,0%
proper N non-subject	12	7	5,1%	5,1%

Table 3: Syntactic function, syntactic category and topicality

The results of table 3 are to be interpreted with caution. The antecedent of *IL* is very likely to have topic status in the sentence in which it occurs (namely in 88% of the examples). However, we observe that the antecedent of *CE* is also often likely to have topic status, i.e. in 67% of the examples. This general tendency

thus shows that both pronouns are most often used in case of topic continuity. In sum, *CE* is not a strong marker of topic shift.

Nevertheless, it remains so that *IL* is likely to mark more often than *CE* topic continuity and that *CE* marks 2.7 times as often as *IL* a topic shift: 33% versus 12%. Therefore, *CE* can perhaps be situated somewhere in between the strong topic continuity marker *IL* and the topic shift marker *CE/UI-CI* (cf. Demol 2007). In fact, even though both pronouns are most often used in case of topic continuity (*IL* in 88% and *CE* in 67%), the application of the CHI-Square-test shows that the observed differences between *IL* and *CE* (which at first sight seem to be rather small) are highly significant (chi-square = 21,59; > critical value of 10.83 for significance level of 0.001, with df1). This means that *IL* and *CE* behave differently with respect to information structure.

5.2.5. Another argument in favor of the presence of a 'shift' in the case of *CE* ?

Our attention was drawn to another factor that could be related to the idea that *CE* marks some kind of a shift with respect to the previous discourse. Intuitively, it seemed like *CE* was used more often than *IL* in the corpus we examined, when there was a shift from the discourse of the journalist to a portion of reported speech in the form of a quotation (reported direct speech), as in (15):

- (15) [...] Byron Nelson était réputé pour son swing fluide et ses bonnes manières, [...] ce qui le situe au 6e rang du classement américain, dont il occupait encore la 5e place début septembre, avant d'être dépassé par Tiger Woods. « **C'était** vraiment un grand homme [...] », a déclaré, mercredi 27 septembre, l'actuel numéro un mondial à Watford (Angleterre) [...]. (*Le Monde*, 29 September 2006)
'Byron Nelson was famous for his fluid swing and his good manners. This placed him sixth in the American ranking, where he even occupied the fifth place at the beginning of September, before he was surpassed by Tiger Woods. "**He was** really a great man," the present number one declared at Watford (England), on Wednesday, September 27th.'

In order to verify whether the data confirm this impression, we distinguished between 5 possible combinations of the antecedent (AC) and *IL/CE*:

- neither the antecedent nor *IL/CE* occur in a quotation;
- they both occur in the same quotation;
- they occur in separate quotations;

- the antecedent occurs in a quotation but not *IL/CE*;
- *IL/CE* occurs in a quotation, but not the antecedent.

As table 5 shows, in most examples of *IL* and *CE*, neither the pronoun nor the antecedent are situated in a quotation. However, the percentage of these examples is a lot higher for *IL* than for *CE*. In contrast – and as we expected – *CE* occurs 6.5 times more often than *IL* in a quote when the antecedent does not.

	IL	CE	IL	CE
AC in quote but not IL/CE	3	1	1%	1%
AC in same quote	25	21	10%	13%
AC in separate quote	0	4	0%	2%
AC outside quote IL/CE	11	42	4%	26%
IL/CE & AC not in quote	222	94	85%	58%
	261	162	100%	100%

Table 5: Position of the antecedent

Leaving aside the few examples where the antecedent occurs in a quotation but not *IL/CE* and those where they occur in separate ones, we applied the chi square test, which revealed that the difference between *IL* and *CE* is indeed significant ($\chi^2 = 45.45$, where the critical value for 2 d.f. at the 0.001 level = 13.82): *IL* and *CE* behave differently with respect to the presence of quotations. *CE* is preferred over *IL* in quotations when the antecedent occurs outside the quotation, and could be said to mark another kind of shift, namely from one kind of discourse to another, from one speaker to another.

The question then arises whether this preference for *CE* might perhaps explain why it is used in some cases where the antecedent is most likely topical. In other words, the shift of speaker could help to explain some counter-examples. A quick survey has shown, however, that in only 13% of the examples where *CE* is used despite the fact that the antecedent is likely to be a topic, does it mark a shift between two different speakers/types of discourse.

6. Conclusions

This paper set out to answer the question whether IS influences the use of the personal pronoun *IL* and the demonstrative pronoun *CE* in copular sentences. First of all, it has shown that *IL* is likely to mark topic continuity in almost 90% of all examples (cf. table 4).

Second, it has shown that *CE* marks a topic shift or is likely to mark a topic shift in the following cases. When there is no or no clear antecedent for *CE* or when the antecedent is of a propositional nature, the referent of *CE* was not topical before its mention in the copular sentence and therefore *CE* marks a kind of topic shift in these examples. Overall, examples of this kind are more frequent than those with a concrete antecedent. Furthermore, in 20% of the examples with a concrete antecedent, the antecedent is a dislocated subject and dislocations are used to promote non-topical referents to topic status. Finally, *CE* very likely marks a topic shift in 33% of the remaining cases. This is 2.7 times as much as *IL*.

Based on these observations, topic continuity and topic shift seem to play a role in the use of *IL* and *CE* in copular sentences. However, since there are no absolute correlations, it is obvious that there are other factors that also determine their use. In future research, we plan to examine how topic continuity and topic shift interact with these other factors, such as animacy of the referents, syntactic category of the predicate and types of copular sentences.

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