

# On the Acquisition of *ne ... que* ‘only’ in English-French

Laurent Dekydtspotter and Rebecca A. Petrush  
Indiana University

## 1. Introduction

French exhibits a bipartite *ne...que XP* construction (1), where *ne* is optional in colloquial usage, which can substitute for the adverbial expression *seulement* ‘only’ in (2) both of which are equivalent to (3). This construction has been discussed in the literature by Azoulay-Vicente (1988), Dekydtspotter (1993) and von Stechow and Iatridou (2005).

- (1) Marie (n’) a vu que Stéphanie.  
‘Marie (neg) saw *que* Stéphanie.’
- (2) Marie a vu seulement Stéphanie.
- (3) Marie saw only Stephanie.

There are two potential approaches to its acquisition: a holistic approach, under which the (discontinuous) structure (*ne*)...*que XP* is stored whole with the stipulation that it expresses *only XP*; or a compositional approach, where the *que XP* is treated as a kind of exceptive phrase (akin to “someone other than XP”) syntactically and semantically dependent on a negative head *ne* ‘not’. We investigate the manner in which English-French learners analyze the *ne que* construction.

A body of work argues that second-language (L2) learners get off the ground by storing expressions whole as fixed formulas together with dimensions of context. Decomposition and compositional treatment follows (Hakuta, 1974; Myles, Mitchell & Hooper, 1999; Towell & Hawkins, 1994; Weinert, 1995; Wong-Fillmore, 1976). Thus, Towell & Hawkins (1994, p.254) suggest that “...as the learner develops greater awareness of the linguistic system, it may be possible to reexamine the formulaic utterance and reinterpret its internal structure as part of the learning of the language system.” Bley-Vroman (1997) argues for L2 grammars as systems of constructions, without the generative component of native speaker grammars. Nick Ellis (2000a, b) reinterprets development in purely holistic terms: First, structures are stored whole; then, they acquire slots as well as refined semantic, pragmatic specifications, evolving into a system of constructions. However, Bardovi-Harlig (2002, in press) questions the solidity of the formula-to-generation scenarios, citing empirical difficulties and lack of clarity of the notions involved.

We present a case study investigating the manner in which English-French learners analyze the (*ne*)...*que XP* structure. Its syntax is quirky; its interpretation is either taught or contextually recognizable, but the relation between its form and meaning is opaque. A holistic meaning postulate and a compositional treatment have different consequences.

## 2. The (Ne)... Que XP Structure

Azoulay-Vicente (1988) noted that the *ne que* construction obeys strong locality constraints and a specific distribution: *Que* is banned from the sentential subject position (4) and the complement of prepositions (6). She argued that the construction involves an empty category (that we identify as an Op following Dekydtspotter, 1993) restricted by the *que* phrase. The contrasts in (4–5) and in (6–7) are explained by the Empty Category Principle (ECP), which requires empty categories to be properly governed.

- (4) \* $[Op_i \text{ que Jean } ] n_i$ 'est arrivé.  
Op *que* Jean neg arrived  
'Only Jean arrived.'
- (5) Il  $n_i$ 'est arrivé  $[Op_i \text{ que Jean}]$ .  
there neg arrived *que* Jean  
'There arrived only Jean.'
- (6) \*Marie ne parlera à  $[Op_i \text{ que Jean}]$ .  
Marie neg will speak to *que* Jean  
'Marie will speak to only Jean.'
- (7) Marie ne parlera  $[Op_i \text{ qu' à Jean}]$ .  
Marie neg will speak *que* to Jean  
'Marie will speak only to Jean.'

We assume that  $[Op_i \text{ que XP}]$  is a polarity item locally licensed by negation. If it is embedded inside a complement, movement is required for local licensing. Thus, the *que* phrase can be embedded inside an NP, but only if movement is possible, as (8–11) show. Thus, in (8) *que* is felicitous in argument position, because the position allows movement, as (10) shows. The infelicity of (9) is due to the fact that the adjunct position does not allow movement as the ungrammaticality of (11) shows.

- (8) Pierre  $ne_i$  prendra  $[\text{des photos } [Op_i \text{ que de Jean } ]]$ .  
Pierre neg will-take some pictures *que* of Jean  
'Pierre will take pictures only of Jean.'
- (9) \*Pierre  $ne_i$  prendra  $[\text{des trains } [Op_i \text{ que de six heures}]]$ .  
Pierre neg will-take some trains *que* of six o'clock  
'Pierre will take only six o'clock trains.'
- (10) De  $qui_i$  prendra-t-il des photos  $t_i$  ?  
of who will-take-he pictures  
'Who will he take pictures of?'
- (11) \*De  $quelle \text{ heure}_i$  prendra-t-il le train  $t_i$  ?  
of which hours will-take-he the train  
'Which hour will he take the train?'

Support for the proposal is provided by the parallel distribution of *que* phrases and negative quantifiers like *personne* 'no-one' in embedded clauses, subject to the Condition on Extraction Domains: both are allowed inside verbal complements (12, 14), but are disallowed inside subjects (13, 15).

- (12) <sup>?</sup>Il ne voudrait qu'on garde une photo *que* de lui.  
he neg would-want that we keep a picture *que* of him  
'He would like us to keep a picture only of him.'
- (13) \*Il ne voudrait qu'une photo *que* de lui soit gardée.  
he neg would-want that a picture *que* of him be kept  
'He would like that a picture only of him be kept.'
- (14) <sup>?</sup>Il ne voudrait qu'on garde une photo de personne.  
he neg would-want that we keep a picture of no-one  
'He would like us to keep a picture of no-one.'
- (15) \*Il ne voudrait qu'une photo de personne soit gardée.  
he neg would-want that a picture of no-one be kept  
'He would like that a picture of no-one be kept.'

A compositional (16) or holistic (17) representation of *ne que* could be entertained by learners. On the compositional treatment of (*ne*)... *que* *Stéphanie* in (16), negation (irrespective of whether *ne* is present) locally licenses a null operator restricted by the *que* phrase. The null operator is interpreted as an existential quantifier (with an exceptive restriction introduced by *que*) construed in the scope of



treatment, these interpretive distinctions are not part of the interpretation: They require additional stipulations about the scope of *que* phrases and intensional verbs based on observation.

### 3. Learnability

Naïve native speakers are not consciously aware of the intricacies of the (*ne*)...*que XP* structure nor are these intricacies the object of instruction. At our institution, intermediate learners are only occasionally exposed to *ne*...*que* and told, if anything, that it means *only*. There is no instruction beyond this. There is little evidence for the type of asymmetries in which we are interested in the input: *ne* drops frequently in colloquial language; *ne* and *que* (when both present) are typically extremely local. Therefore, sentences such as (19) and (20) are not recurrently (if at all) present in the typical classroom input of intermediate learners, because they are not the preferred means of expression. In the interest of keeping *ne* and *que* local, one would rather say (21) in interaction with focus—which is ambiguous.

- (21) Aurélie ne rêve que d'épouser UN ACTEUR.  
 Aurélie neg dreams que to marry AN ACTOR  
 'Aurélie dreams only of marrying AN ACTOR.'

But, even if the forms (19) and (20) were recurrently present, the world of conversation is often either too rich or too vague to reliably indicate on which interpretation a sentence was uttered. Crucially, *C'est Brad Pitt* can follow a sentence where *ne* occurs under the intensional verb. Casual observation, therefore, does not provide reliable information, making the feasibility of learning via induction remote in the extreme. Thus, if intermediate English-French learners do not calculate the interpretation, we do not expect the appearance of similar sensitivities to scope. If intermediate English-French learners display such sensitivities despite the lack of information provided by the world of conversation, it has to be because they calculate the interpretation and get the effects for free.

### 4. The Experimental Design

There were 97 intermediate level learners of French: 49 learners in their third semester of college French and 48 in their fifth semester, as well as 11 advanced learners and 22 native speakers. In addition to a short biographical questionnaire providing language background, respondents indicated: whether they were aware (even vaguely) of sentences as in *Marie n'a vu que Jean* 'Marie saw only Jean' in French, whether they experienced *Marie n'a vu que Jean* as unacceptable, and whether they had ever received instruction or training on the topic.

The task was administered in a language lab. Respondents sat at a computer monitor and accessed 40 sound files on the computer. Respondents were told that they were to act as scorers for a final comprehension examination in Mme Goyette's English class, following an elaborate scenario: First, Mrs. Briggs read some stories in English to pupils. The pupils would then go to Mme Goyette to relate what happened in the story. As part of a team of graders, respondents were presented with random transcripts of proceedings with the names of pupils confidential. They read the stories in English, Mme Goyette's information question *Qu'est-ce que tu as compris?* "What did you understand?", and listened to the answer which was also printed. They were asked to evaluate how well the responses reflected solid understanding of the story on a scale of values:

-2	-1	0	+1	+2
very badly	rather badly	can't tell	rather well	very well

Respondents were told that an answer need not have every detail of the story to show solid understanding, but it should not be false nor should it mislead a listener who had not previously heard the story about central aspects of the story. Respondents were told that Mme Goyette's question could be answered in potentially more than one way, and that answers could be ambiguous. There were 6

training items. There were three versions of the task, containing 28 experimental items consisting of 7 quadruples.

We provide one quadruple in Figures 1–4, illustrating how context and *ne* placement were manipulated to induce different interpretations of the *ne...que XP*. The quadruples crossed *de re* (specific) and *de dicto* (non-specific) contexts with placement of *ne* with respect to an intensional verb such as *rêver* ‘to dream’. Thus, in Figures 1 and 2, the *de dicto* interpretation obtains regardless of the placement of *ne*; in Figures 3 and 4, however, the *de re* interpretation is more difficult to obtain when *ne* is placed after the intensional verb. This is what we expect under a compositional treatment.

**Figure 1:** Context requiring a *de dicto* interpretation with *ne* placed high.

Mrs. Briggs: Aurélie is a star-struck teenager who watches every movie that comes out and always reads the celebrity magazine *Us Weekly*. The funny thing is, whenever she looks at it, she fancies herself as an actor’s wife and nothing else.

Madame Goyette: Qu’est-ce que tu as compris ?

Elève: Quand elle lit *Us Weekly*, Aurélie ne rêve d’épouser qu’un acteur.

‘When she reads *Us Weekly*, Aurélie dreams of marrying only an actor.’

**Figure 2:** Context requiring a *de dicto* interpretation with *ne* placed low.

Mrs. Briggs: Aurélie is a star-struck teenager who watches every movie that comes out and always reads the celebrity magazine *Us Weekly*. The funny thing is, whenever she looks at it, she fancies herself as an actor’s wife and nothing else.

Madame Goyette: Qu’est-ce que tu as compris ?

Elève: Quand elle lit *Us Weekly*, Aurélie rêve de n’épouser qu’un acteur.

‘When she reads *Us Weekly*, Aurélie dreams of marrying only an actor.’

**Figure 3:** Context requiring a *de re* interpretation with *ne* placed high.

Mrs. Briggs: Aurélie is a star-struck teenager who watches every movie that comes out and reads the celebrity magazine *Us Weekly*. In fact, whenever she looks at it, she imagines her life as the next wife of the newly single Brad Pitt.

Madame Goyette: Qu’est-ce que tu as compris ?

Elève: Quand elle lit *Us Weekly*, Aurélie ne rêve d’épouser qu’un acteur.

‘When she reads *Us Weekly*, Aurélie dreams of marrying only an actor.’

**Figure 4:** Context requiring a *de re* interpretation with *ne* placed low.

Mrs. Briggs: Aurélie is a star-struck teenager who watches every movie that comes out and reads the celebrity magazine *Us Weekly*. In fact, whenever she looks at it, she imagines her life as the next wife of the newly single Brad Pitt.

Madame Goyette: Qu’est-ce que tu as compris ?

Elève: ?? Quand elle lit *Us Weekly*, Aurélie rêve de n’épouser qu’un acteur.

‘When she reads *Us Weekly*, Aurélie dreams of marrying only an actor.’

Before conducting the analysis, we removed from consideration those learners who indicated in the initial questionnaire that they experienced the structure as unacceptable, as well as those who had had previous experience with languages such as Japanese and Spanish that express *only* with similar structures. As a result, we analyzed 56 intermediate level learners of French: 24 learners in their third semester of college French and 32 learners in their fifth semester of college French. Additionally, we analyzed 33 experts: 22 native speakers of French and 11 advanced learners. We calculated mean rates of acceptance, identifying positive answers. We calculated scores from positive and negative values, as these might provide information where acceptance rates do not.

## 5. Experimental Results

We first consider the results of the intermediate learners (Table 1). We conducted a 3-way repeated-measures ANOVA with placement of *ne* and specificity as within-subject factors and with semester as between-subject factor. There was no main effect of semester in the between-subject analysis:  $F(1, 54) = .842, p = .363$ . Tests of within-subject effects revealed no main effect of *ne* placement  $F(1, 54) = .039, p = .845$  or specificity  $F(1, 54) = .676, p = .415$ . Interactions of *ne* placement with semester were marginal:  $F(1, 54) = 2.920, p = .093$ . Interactions of specificity with semester, however, were highly significant:  $F(1, 54) = 7.792, p = .007$ .

	<i>ne</i> placed high		<i>ne</i> placed low	
	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	5 <sup>th</sup> semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	5 <sup>th</sup> semester
<i>de dicto</i>	56.55% (26.47)	66.14% (29.73)	54.85% (25.67)	71.80% (19.31)
<i>de re</i>	66.07% (28.51)	55.80% (30.21)	57.74% (26.13)	61.40% (16.52)

**Table 1. Acceptance Rate for Third (n = 24) and Fifth (n = 32) Semester Learners**

To examine the role of specificity in the data, we conducted 4 post hoc t-tests, adopting a Bonferroni protection measure of  $\alpha = .05/4 = .0125$ . For 3<sup>rd</sup> semester learners, differences in the relative acceptability of interpretations did not reach significance:  $t(23) = 1.829, p = .080$  when *ne* was placed high;  $t(23) = .561, p = .561$  when *ne* was placed low. Crucially, for 5<sup>th</sup> semester learners, acceptance rates for the *de re* interpretation were significantly lower than those for the *de dicto* interpretation when *ne* was placed low:  $t(31) = 2.837, p = .008$ . When *ne* was placed high, the contrast in acceptability of interpretations was not significant:  $t(31) = 1.860, p = .072$ . Scores yielded parallel results, and will therefore not be discussed here. The pattern of contrasts in the behavior of 5<sup>th</sup> semester learners is highly suggestive: This pattern is naturally accounted for under a compositional analysis in which *ne* placed below the matrix intensional verb in the architecture of the sentence restricts the availability of the *de re* construal.

If the placement of *ne* constrains the scope of the existential *que* phrase in English-French interlanguage, we expect that there should be a general interpretation-dependent effect of placing *ne* low for learners who accept *ne* placed high. In Table 2, we consider the evidence provided by those learners who accepted *ne* placed high in *de re* context at rates above 50% (n = 36). We conducted two planned t-tests on Group A, adopting a Bonferroni protection measure of  $\alpha = .05/2 = .025$ .

	Group A		Group B	
	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low
<i>de dicto</i>	69.44% (22.43)	67.05% (21.59)	48.69% (33.74)	60.00% (26.87)
<i>de re</i>	79.36% (15.43)	65.69% (19.83)	25.72% (12.78)	49.29% (19.37)

**Table 2. Relative Acceptance Rate for Those Who Accept *ne* Placed High above 50% (Group A, n = 36), versus Those Who do not (Group B, n = 20)**

This analysis of Group A learners revealed a crucial asymmetry: in *de re* contexts, these learners accepted *ne* placed high significantly more readily than *ne* placed low ( $t(19) = 5.648, p < .0005$ ). In *de dicto* contexts, however, there was no such difference between low and high placement of *ne* ( $t(19) = .567, p = .575$ ). This asymmetry is also accounted for if *ne que* is compositionally interpreted.

Lastly, we consider the response pattern of those respondents who reported not being aware of the *ne que* construction prior to testing (n = 17) in Table 3. We conducted two planned t-tests on acceptance rates and scores, adopting a Bonferroni protection measure of  $\alpha = .05/2 = .025$ .

	Acceptance rates		Scores	
	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low
<i>de dicto</i>	68.07% (22.32)	58.82% (20.15)	.77 (.80)	.61 (.66)
<i>de re</i>	69.75% (20.75)	62.19% (21.30)	.87 (.52)	.57 (.55)

**Table 3. Relative Acceptance Rate and Scores for Respondents with no Awareness of *ne que* (n = 17)**

Acceptance rates revealed no asymmetry, but there was an asymmetry in the scores. Two planned comparisons on the scores revealed an asymmetry in the acceptance of *ne* placed high vs. *ne* placed low in *de re* contexts:  $t(16) = 2.578, p = .020$ , but not in *de dicto* contexts:  $t(16) = .980, p = .342$ . This is a suggestive result: These learners have reported that this structure is new to them, yet they display a pattern of behavior compatible with a compositional treatment.

We now turn to the behavior of our advanced learners and native speakers (Tables 4 & 5).

	Advanced learners		French natives	
	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low
<i>de dicto</i>	70.13% (17.44)	64.94% (28.83)	72.08% (16.77)	69.48% (26.87)
<i>de re</i>	67.53% (22.21)	59.74% (29.84)	78.90% (17.97)	77.27% (15.68)

**Table 4. Acceptance Rates for Advanced Learners (n = 11) and French Natives (n = 22)**

There was no main effect of group in the between-subject analysis:  $F(1, 31) = 2.876, p = .100$ . Tests of within-subject effects revealed a marginal main effect of *ne* placement  $F(1, 31) = 3.019, p = .092$ , but no main effect of specificity  $F(1, 31) = .168, p = .685$ . There was no interaction of *ne* placement with group:  $F(1, 31) = .783, p = .383$ , nor any interaction of specificity with semester:  $F(1, 31) = .783, p = .188$ . Analysis of acceptance rates revealed no differences; we therefore analyzed scores for additional evidence.

	Advanced learners		French natives	
	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low	<i>ne</i> high	<i>ne</i> low
<i>de dicto</i>	.93 (.47)	.74 (.84)	.82 (.48)	.80 (.59)
<i>de re</i>	.72 (.66)	.40 (.89)	.95 (.45)	.74 (.47)

**Table 5. Mean Scores for Advanced Learners (n = 11) and French Natives (n = 22)**

There was no main effect of group in the between-subject analysis:  $F(1, 31) = .885, p = .354$ . Tests of within-subject effects revealed a main effect of *ne* placement  $F(1, 31) = 6.863, p = .013$ , but no main effect of specificity  $F(1, 31) = 1.021, p = .361$ . There was no interaction of *ne* placement with group:  $F(1, 31) = .783, p = .383$ , and no interaction of specificity with semester:  $F(1, 31) = .783, p = .188$ . A post hoc analysis was conducted using 2 paired samples t-tests ( $\alpha = .05/2 = .025$ .); these t-tests revealed a significant contrast in acceptance of *ne* placed high vs. *ne* placed low in *de re* context:  $t(32) = 2.343, p = .025$ , but not in *de dicto* context:  $t(32) = .801, p = .429$ .

In sum, we found revealing asymmetries in the data from novices and experts alike with a subtle distinction between the two groups. Throughout L2 acquisition of French (as well as in native French), we found effects of *ne* placement on the relative availability of *de re* versus *de dicto* interpretations. However, whereas these trends were apparent in the acceptance rates of the novices, they were only revealed in the scores for the experts.

## 6. A Discussion

There is evidence from the acceptance rates of learners in intermediate proficiency levels that the *de re* (specific) interpretation is harder to get with *ne* placed low than with *ne* placed high. In contrast, the *de dicto* (non-specific) interpretation is unaffected by the placement of *ne* with respect to the intensional verb. This receives a ready explanation if *ne que* is analyzed as a bi-partite structure: In the standard theory of scope, the *de dicto* reading is due to interpretation inside the complement of the intensional verb and therefore in its scope. In contrast, the *de re* construal requires interpretation outside the scope of the intensional matrix verb, outside the complement of the verb. This involves added computations. When *ne* is placed low in the scope of the intensional verb, the *de re* interpretation outside the scope of the intensional verb comes with significant additional costs. On the holistic treatment, such knowledge would have to come from observation. In addition to the conceptual problems associated with induction which make it unfeasible, we do not expect that novices would exhibit any sensitivity to scope differences for lack of direct experience, but they do. This suggests that such sensitivity to scope results from calculations rather than from observations.

## 7. Conclusion

We found in English-French evidence of subtle scope interactions between negation, intensional verbs and existential exceptive expressions, which are naturally explained if English-French learners calculate the meaning of *ne que XP* in terms of two independent elements: negation associated with *ne* and an existential exceptive expression associated with *que*. In contrast, the hypothesis of a lexical stipulation that *ne que XP* means *only XP* together with additional scope statements established by observation seems unworkable on conceptual and empirical grounds. Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that English-French learners (like native speakers) are inherently guided to treat the *ne...que XP* structure compositionally, with *ne* as a negative head and the *que* phrase as an existential exceptive expression locally licensed by negation.

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edited by Mary Grantham O'Brien,  
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