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### **► To cite this version:**

Guillaume Desagulier. ”C’est de la bombe!”: Qualitative count-to-mass conversion in French copular subject-predicate constructions.. *Constructions in French*, John Benjamins, pp.201-232, 2012, CAL. ⟨halshs-00731030⟩

**HAL Id: halshs-00731030**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00731030v1>**

Submitted on 12 Sep 2012

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« C'est de la bombe ! »: qualitative count-to-mass conversion in French copular subject-predicate constructions

*Guillaume Desagulier*

### Abstract

In this paper, I propose a Construction Grammar approach to the count/mass distinction in French. Rather than confine my analysis to NPs, I examine the effects of massive conversion in the broader context of two partially-filled idiomatic constructions: the CCDN construction (*ça c'est de la voiture !* 'that's some car') and the CDN construction (*cette voiture, c'est de la bombe !* 'that car rocks!'). Both inherit properties from the Copular Subject Predicate construction (*c'est une voiture* 'that's a car'), except their nominal predicates undergo count-to-mass conversion. Generally, count-to-mass conversion has a quantitative function: it turns NPs whose referents are numerically quantifiable into an NP whose referents cannot be quantified as separate entities. In the CCDN and the CDN, count-to-mass conversion has a qualitative function: it predicates a quality of the subject by identifying this subject with the prototype of the category denoted by the nominal predicate. I show that the CCDN and the CDN belong to the same constructional network, even if they differ as to the kinds of identification that they realize.

## **1. Introduction**

As in many languages, French nouns are divisible into two categories: mass nouns and count nouns. Even if this distinction has received considerable attention, it remains a matter of discussion among linguists (cf. *inter alia* Allan, 1980; Galmiche, 1986; Galmiche, 1989; Gillon, 1992; Langacker, 1987: 203-208; Langacker, 2008: 128-146; Nicolas, 2002). The

main contrasting properties pertain to the kinds of determiners that each allows. In theory, only mass nouns permit the partitive articles *du* (= *de + le*), *de la*, and *de l'* in French:

(1) *Ajoutez du sel.*  
 add-IMP.2SG/PL ART.PART salt.SG.MASS  
 ‘Add (some) salt.’

(2) *Tamisez de la farine.*  
 sift-IMP.2SG/PL ART.PART flour.SG.MASS  
 ‘Sift (some) flour.’

(3) *Versez de l'=huile d'olive.*  
 pour-IMP.2SG/PL ART.PART=olive oil.SG.MASS  
 ‘Pour (some) olive oil.’<sup>1</sup>

French also has a plural partitive article – *des* (= *de + les*). *Des* combines the partitive article *de* with the plural definite article *les*. It determines plural count nouns exclusively, since French mass nouns do not normally form plurals:

(4) *Mangeons des frites.*  
 eat-IMP.1PL ART.PART.PL fries.PL.COUNT  
 ‘Let’s eat (some) fries.’

While this morphosyntactic behavior may seem intuitively straightforward, linguists still struggle to predict the count/mass distinction. For example, while *pomme* ‘apple’ appears to be a clear example of a count noun, it is equally acceptable as a mass noun, as the following examples show (adapted from Galmiche, 1989: 75):

(5) *Dans cette tarte, il y a de la pomme.*  
 in this pie it PRO.ADV.LOC have-PRS.3SG ART.PART  
*pomme.*

<sup>1</sup> The partitive articles *de*, *de la*, and *l'* translate either as *some*, when the extraction of a quantity from a mass is foregrounded (e.g. *some bread* -> an unspecified quantity of bread), or  $\emptyset$ , when it is the quality of what is extracted that is foregrounded (e.g.  $\emptyset$  *bread* -> as opposed to butter). In French, the zero article behaves differently (Wilmet, 1998: 148-155).

apple.SG.MASS

‘In this pie, there is apple.’ (= crushed apple)

- (6) *Dans ce verger, on produit de la*  
in this orchard one produce-PRS.3SG ART.PART  
*pomme, de la poire, de la cerise,*  
apple.SG.MASS ART.PART pear.SG.MASS ART.PART cherry.SG.MASS  
*etc.*

etc

‘In this orchard, they grow apples, pears, and cherries.’ (= fruit species)

- (7) *Son régime lui interdit de manger*  
his diet him prevent-PRS.3SG of eat-INF  
*de la pomme sucrée.*  
ART.PART apple.SG.MASS sweet

‘He can’t eat sweet apples because of his diet.’ (= apple species)

- (8) *Dans cet entrepôt, il y a de la*  
in this warehouse it PRO.ADV.LOC have-PRS.3SG ART.PART  
*pomme à perte de vue.*  
apple.SG.MASS at loss of sight

‘In this warehouse, there are apples as far as the eye can see.’ (= large quantities of apples)

As one might expect, determiners are not a reliable criterion to account for the count/mass distinction.

In this paper, I want to propose a different approach to the count/mass distinction. Rather than confine my investigation to NPs to decide whether they are count or mass, I view these grammatical categories as an outcome of the combined effects of morphosyntactic *and*

semantic factors in the broader context of a construction. I will thus assume the theoretical framework of Cognitive Construction Grammar (henceforth CCxG) as laid out in Langacker (1987b), Goldberg (1995), and refined in Langacker (2008: 161-214) and Goldberg (2003; 2006). Despite minor disagreements between Langacker (2009) and Goldberg (2009), the main tenets of CCxG still hold. For example, fundamental aspects of grammatical form emerge from usage – conversations, in which speakers interact and convey meanings in conventional and innovative ways. By using the construction as a basic unit in the grammatical description of the count/mass distinction, I hope to avoid the problems that the traditional NP-centered approaches encounter.

Like all Construction Grammar models, CCxG posits taxonomic relations between constructions (Croft & Cruse, 2004). This means that linguistic knowledge consists of networks of families of constructions. CCxG advocates a usage-based model to explain how constructions are stored in the taxonomies. Because speakers generalize over recurring usage experiences in a bottom-up fashion, CCxG allows for redundancy: similar information may be represented at multiple levels in the taxonomy. Inheritance hierarchies are the cornerstone of the structured inventory of constructions in CCxG. They are also what makes linguistic generalizations possible within a given language. As Goldberg writes, “[b]road generalizations are captured by constructions that are inherited by many other constructions; more limited patterns are captured by positing constructions at various midpoints of the hierarchical network” (2003: 222). For a given family of constructions, constructions at the lower taxonomic levels will inherit some properties from constructions at the higher levels and at the same time will display properties that are specific to them. It is assumed that higher-level constructions are more productive than lower-level constructions.

In this paper, I will study count-to-mass conversions in two constructions that inherit properties from a higher-level construction, namely the copular subject-predicate construction

(CSPC). (9) below provides a schematic representation of the CSPC and (10) is a specific illustration:

- (9) CSPC:           s[*c'est* NP[*un(e)* N (AP)]]   (adapted from Lambrecht, 2004: 158)
- (10) *C'=est*       *un*   *film*                   *intéressant.*  
it=is            a       movie.SG.COUNT   interesting  
‘That’s an interesting movie.’

In the CSPC, the predicate NP in canonical post-copular position is further modified by an adjective phrase. Note that the AP is optional, and is not required after an NP that expresses an intrinsic quality (*c'est un génie* ‘he is a genius’). Some APs can appear before the NP (*c'est une belle table* ‘it is a nice table’). The presence of the indefinite article *un(e)* indicates that the NP is treated as [+count].

Within the productive French copular subject-predicate construction, I will focus on two partially-filled phrasal idiomatic constructions that display count-to-mass conversion. These constructions are exemplified in (11) and (12). I will examine them against the background of the productive pattern in (9):

- (11) *Ça,*           *c'=est de la*           *bagnole!*  
DEM.PRO        it=is   ART.PART   ride.SG.MASS  
‘That’s some ride!’
- (12) *Ce*           *film,*   *c'=est de la*           *bombe!*  
DEM.DET       movie it=is   ART.PART   bomb.SG.MASS  
‘That movie’s awesome!’

(11) and (12) are syntactically similar to the CSPC, except that each NP is determined by a partitive article and is, in theory, construed as [-count]. Insofar as *bagnole* and *film* are normally count nouns, one plausible scenario is that the conversion is a constraint of the

construction, not just the determiner. These constructions have the effect of switching an indefinite predicate NP from count to mass, making any NP modifier from the AP category unnecessary:

- (11') *Ça, c'=est une (vraie) bagnole* > *Ça,*  
 DEM.PRO it=is a true ride.SG.COUNT DEM.PRO  
*c'=est de la bagnole*  
 it=is ART.PART ride.SG.MASS  
 'That's a real ride' > 'That's some ride'
- (12') *Ce film, c'=est une (vraie)*  
 DEM.DET movie.SG.COUNT it=is a true  
*bombe* > *Ce film, c'=est*  
 bomb.SG.COUNT DEM.PRO movie.SG.COUNT it=is  
*de la bombe*  
 ART.PART bomb.SG.MASS  
 'This movie is a real bomb.' > 'This movie is awesome.'

Here, count-to-mass conversion does not modify the way the NP denotatum should be quantified by the addressee, but emphasizes to what degree it should be qualified. In (11), the referent of the NP *bagnole* corresponds to the archetype of the speaker's conception of a car, while in (12) the referent of the NP *film* ranks as excellent. I will call the construction in (11) the '*Ça, c'est du/de la/de l'* NP' construction (CCDN) and the construction in (12) the '*C'est du/de la/de l'* NP' construction (CDN). Both constructions are restricted to spoken French and considered colloquial. The existence of the CDN has gone virtually unnoticed in most reference grammars and linguistic papers. However, some researchers make frequent reference to the CCDN, especially in the literature on count-to-mass conversions (Nicolas, 2002), the partitive article (Martin, 1983: 40), gradation (Schneidecker, 2010; Whittaker,

2002), and polysemy (Victorri, 2002). But traditional approaches to mass conversion are local: they focus on NPs, to the detriment of the whole constructions in which these NPs occur. I will discuss the limits of the local approaches below.

To illustrate the constructions, I will use made-up examples as paradigms for the description of basic constructional features. I will also use naturally-occurring examples to illustrate specific constructional features. These are taken from a collection of small datasets that I compiled with web spiders. I restricted my data collection to French blog servers and, to a lesser extent, Usenet. Admittedly, the Internet suffers from a thematic bias on new technologies, as well as a bias of social class and age. Although this could be a problem for register-specific or thematic-sensitive case studies, this is actually an asset here since the CCDN and the CDN occur commonly in spontaneous speech among young speakers and are quite adapted to reviews and comments (on a post, a new product, a recipe, a video game, a software, etc.) Since blogs and Usenet are rife with comments and value judgments (it may even be their *raison d'être*), we can reasonably expect a high type frequency of the CCDN and CDN constructions. The language of blogs and web groups is written, but in terms of register, it has several features of spoken language such as forms of address, a certain degree of informality, unmediated spelling and syntax, etc. (Crystal, 2006: 31-52). By specifying servers, one can be almost entirely certain about the dialectal origins of the texts (posts on blogs and groups are seldom anonymous). Blogs and groups are also varied enough to capture a variety of registers<sup>2</sup> and linguistic innovations. Because the CCDN and the CDN are the product of innovative strategies, they proliferate in netspeak. For each example from a

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<sup>2</sup> Crystal characterizes blogs as follows:

“Many blogs are personal diaries, ranging in length from brief notes to extended essays; many are on topics of general interest or concern, such as a hobby or political issue. Some blogs are monologues; some have shared authorship; some are interactive.” (2006: 15)

As regards Usenet, he writes:

“In an asynchronous situation, the interactions are stored in some format, and made available to users upon demand, so that they can catch up with the discussion, or add to it, at any time – even after an appreciable period has passed. The *bulletin boards*, a popular feature of 1980s computer-mediated communication, are one example. The thousands of *newsgroups* on Usenet, covering a vast number of topics, provide another.” (2006: 12)

dataset, I provide the source between brackets. Examples without an indication of source are made up.

I will begin by discussing the limits of traditional approaches to count-to-mass conversion (Section 2). I will then characterize the syntactic and semantic properties of the CSPC (Section 3). I will argue that it is the product of a conflation of two general syntactic types referred to as the copular pattern and the predicative pattern, from which it inherits certain formal, conceptual, and discursive properties. Next, I will present arguments that the CCDN and the CDN are constructions in their own right and that they are part of the same family, namely the CSPC. The CDN and the CCDN are similar in form, but they assume different discursive effects. Therefore, I will treat them separately in Sections 4 and 5 respectively. I will conclude by summing up the assets of a constructional approach to the count/mass distinction over an NP-centered approach.

## 2. Research context

Working out the contrasting properties of count nouns and mass nouns is a difficult task. The first problem is the easy confusion between *ontological* and *linguistic* definitions. These two levels of analysis should be kept distinct. Ontologically speaking, a count noun is a noun whose referents can be counted whereas a mass noun is a noun whose referents are not separate entities (Jackendoff, 1991; Kleiber, 1997):

(13) count nouns: *chaise* ‘chair’, *pensée* ‘thought’, *voiture* ‘car’

(14) mass nouns: *eau* ‘water’, *miel* ‘honey’, *feu* ‘fire’

Most ontological classifications rely on two principles. The first is Quine’s principle of cumulative reference: the sum of the parts of object X is X (Quine, 1960). The second is Cheng’s principle of distributive (or divisive) reference: any part of object X is X (Cheng, 1973). For example, to predict that *car* is a count noun, one can show that its referent violates both principles of cumulative and divisive reference. If one pulls a car apart and adds up the

sum of four, five, or even a hundred parts, these parts do not necessarily form a car (thus against Quine's principle). Also, the individual parts of the car do not form a car (against Cheng's principle). Conversely, by adding more sugar to the sugar already in a bowl, one obtains a larger mass that still counts as 'sugar'. If one examines a sample of sugar from the same bowl, it still counts as 'sugar'. The validation of both principles predicts that *sugar* is a mass noun. Unfortunately, Quine's and Cheng's principles fall short of covering all objects. For instance, the physical properties of water are out of reach of both cumulative and divisive references. Indeed, if a physicist were to extract some water from a quantity of water in a bowl until he or she obtained the last molecule of water ( $H_2O$ ), the next step in the extraction would yield something that is no longer water, but two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. This experiment would violate Cheng's principle. Conversely, combining the two hydrogen atoms obtained in that experiment would not produce water, thus violating Quine's principle<sup>3</sup>. Yet, *water* is a mass noun. To solve this issue, Bunt (1985) and Meulen (1981: 123) call upon the more general principle of homogeneous reference: all parts of a quantity X that are themselves quantities of X can become parts of another quantity X. *Water* is a mass noun because its referent has homogeneous structure. All parts of a quantity of water are themselves quantities of water and can therefore become parts of another quantity of water. Langacker makes a similar observation:

A mass is construed as being internally homogeneous. A typical mass noun such as *water*, designates a substance identified by various qualities: a liquid of low viscosity, largely transparent, tasteless, odorless, nonalcoholic, and so on. Ideally, sampling any portion of a mass is sufficient to reveal those properties. Homogeneity thus consists of being qualitatively the same throughout. (Langacker, 2008: 140)

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<sup>3</sup> Quine himself is well aware of that problem. To solve it, he posits the "Minimal Parts Hypothesis": for each noun *M*, parts of its referent must have a minimal size in order to count as *M*.

Conversely, the referents of count nouns are typically heterogeneous. But once again, the principle of internal homogeneity is flawed: in French, the referent of *fil* ‘thread’ is internally homogeneous (a part of a quantity of thread that is itself a quantity of thread can become part of another quantity of thread). Yet, *fil* is a count noun. The same reasoning applies to many other count nouns, such as *pneu* ‘tire’, *bâton* ‘stick’, *bonbon* ‘candy bar’, *câble* ‘cable’, etc. To my knowledge, no ontological model of the count/mass distinction based on physics or logic proves predictive enough in linguistics. Perhaps confronting the count/mass distinction with ‘the real world out there’ can only end up as a heuristic, at the very best.

If, as linguists, we are to rely on grammatical behavior, can we say that some nouns are primarily [+count] and others are primarily [+ mass]? There is general consensus to say so. Weinreich (1966) considers that the feature [ $\pm$ count] is mostly attributable to the NP, rather than to the noun itself. Allan’s (1980) treatment of the [ $\pm$ count] feature in English hinges on the same compromise. Whether a noun phrase (Det + N) is count or mass is not a matter of degree: an NP is either countable or it is not. However, before they integrate NPs, nouns have “countability preferences”: “some enter countable environments more readily than others” (Allan 1980: 541). To compute the countability preferences of nouns, Allan relies on a series of grammaticality judgment tests. First, he establishes unequivocal countability environments “consisting of every kind of unambiguously countable NP and every kind of unambiguously uncountable NP” (1980: 548). To do this, he uses two factors: a) the “denominator” in the domain of which the noun is the head of the NP, b) whether the NP “governs plural external number registration”. On that basis, he lists four environments: type A (“unit”, *a(n)*, *one*), type F (“fuzzy (plural)”, *several*, *about fifty*, etc.), “NP-external plural registration”, and *all* + NP-SG (1980: 554). While the first three environments define countability, the last one defines uncountability. His next step is to try nouns as NP heads and

ask informants to judge the result for grammaticality. At first sight, Allan successfully correlates the grammatical description of the count/mass distinction with empirical data and justifies that a countability gradient exists. For instance, *car* is “100% countable”, because it satisfies all four tests (<sup>OK</sup>*a new car*, <sup>OK</sup>*several cars*, <sup>OK</sup>*French cars are cheap, aren't they*, \**All car emits carbon dioxide*). Comparatively, *admiration* has a smaller countability score because it satisfies the “type A” test only (<sup>OK</sup>*She developed **an admiration** for the works of Melville*), and *equipment* has the lowest score possible because it satisfies none of the above tests and is therefore fully uncountable. Upon close inspection though, Allan’s approach appears to be semantically coarse-grained, and syntactically narrow. It is coarse-grained because it groups together nouns that have analogous countability scores but distinct semantic properties, such as *oak* and *guitar*. *Oak* may refer either to a tree ([+count]) or wood ([-count]), and *guitar* to either an instrument ([+count]) or a process ([-count]). But the semantic correspondences between [+count] and [-count] denotations are not straightforward: here, vegetable matter and a process should not be put on a par because they are qualitatively distinct. From Allan’s generative perspective, this may seem a trivial issue, but his model fails to tease out the semantic properties that it set out to unveil in the first place. Allan’s approach is also syntactically narrow. He rejects the idea that [±count] is “the intrinsic property of each [noun]”, proposing instead that countability is a feature of the “environment” of the noun (1980: 565). But the reasons for narrowing down this environment to the NP alone are left unclear. First of all, there may be no reason at all. Secondly, an NP-centered approach is necessarily limited in its scope because it is static and cannot satisfactorily predict the contexts where count-to-mass or mass-to-count conversions occur.

Let’s now turn to the specificity of the count/mass distinction in French. In their colossal essay, the modern French grammarians Damourette and Pichon claim that “bold-enough speakers can construe any noun phrase as either numerative or mass” (Damourette &

Pichon, 1930: 414, translation mine). To this day, their claim remains relatively unchallenged, despite some amendments to the contexts where conversions occur (Galmiche, 1989; Nicolas, 2002). As it happens, conversions are frequent in French. (15) and (16) below illustrate mass-to-count and count-to-mass conversions, respectively:

- (15) a. *Ce viticulteur produit du bon vin.*  
 DEM wine-grower make-PRS.3SG ART.PART good.SG  
 wine.SG.MASS  
 ‘This wine-grower makes (some) good wine.’
- b. *Ce viticulteur produit de(s) bons vins.*  
 DEM wine-grower produce-PRS.3SG ART.PART.PL good.PL  
 wine-PL.COUNT  
 ‘This wine-grower makes (some) good wines.’
- (16) a. *Dans ce bar, il y a des meufs.*  
 in DEM bar it PRO.ADV.LOC have-PRS.3SG  
 ART.PART.PL chick-PL.COUNT  
 ‘Some chicks come to this bar.’
- b. *Dans ce bar, il y a de la meuf.*  
 in DEM bar it.IMPERS PRO.ADV.LOC have-PRS.3SG  
 ART.PART chick-SG.MASS  
 ‘Many chicks come to this bar.’

(15a) and (16a) exemplify typical uses of *vin* and *meuf*, respectively a mass noun and a count noun, while (15b) and (16b) illustrate possible conversions. In (15a), nothing is said as to the wine variety, whereas in (15b), the existence of several varieties of wine is specified. In (16a), the number of women who go to the bar is left unspecified, whereas in (16b) the count-to-mass conversion makes it clear that the bar is a place known for its female population. Galmiche (1989) accepts the traditional claim that some nouns or NPs are primarily [+count] and others primarily [+mass] because it is a necessary condition for conversions to exist. He observes that grammar rules fall short of predicting all conversions because they are an effect of figurative language, or “metaphors” (1989: 75). Galmiche reviews four hypothetical machines developed by philosophers to account for conversions: the “universal grinder”, the “universal multiplier”, the “universal sorter”, and the “universal packer”. The first two devices are meant to explain count-to-mass conversions, while the last two target mass-to-count conversions. For example, the “universal grinder” (Pelletier, 1975), takes an object denoted by a count noun, grinds it, and spits out the stuff that the object is made of (e.g. a nut, once grinded, becomes ‘nut-stuff’). Quite conveniently, we can use this machine to turn *une pomme* ‘an apple’ into *de la pomme* ‘apple-stuff’ or ‘some apple’. The “universal packer” (Bunt, 1985), works the other way around: it takes as input a homogeneous stream of any substance that a mass term may refer to, such as *wine*, and outputs one or more packages that contains contextually-relevant amounts of wine. Thus, (17) is contextually relevant in a restaurant, where the substance denoted by the mass noun commonly comes in standard portions, e.g. glasses:

- (17) *Les clients ont commandé deux vins.*  
 the customers have ordered two wine-PL.COUNT  
 ‘The customers have ordered two wines.’

The above considerations show that *situational* context is primordial to understand the count/mass distinction.

But hypothetical devices are of little help in linguistics, first because they do not predict the *grammatical* contexts where conversions occur, second because metaphorical usage outnumbers the machines. Galmiche makes three observations. First, none of the hypothetical devices is in fact universal because each has contextual limitations. Next, no transfer, whatever its direction, can be predicted once and for all. Finally, one cannot decide whether a noun is [+count] or [+mass] from a description of the NP alone.

In the next sections, I will show the assets of a constructional approach to the count/mass distinction over an NP-centered approach. NP-centered approaches such as Weinreich (1966) or Allan (1980) are limited in scope because they do not take into account a central aspect of semantics: the non-compositionality of phrasal expressions.

### 3. The copular subject-predicate construction: *c'est une belle voiture*

I aim to show that the CCDN and the CDN are members of the taxonomic network of subject-predicate constructions. This section provides the syntactic and semantic backgrounds required to understand the constructional network structured by the CSPC. My description of the formal structure and information structure of the CSPC is based on Lambrecht (1994; 2004).

Examples (18) through (20) will help illustrate the schematic representation of the CSPC in (9):

(9) CSPC:  $s[c'est_{NP}[un(e) N (AP)]]$

(18) *C'=est un film.*

it=is a movie-SG.COUNT

'That is a movie.'

(19) *C'=est passionnant.*



(*c'est le film* 'it is the movie'), because it implies that a clausal post-modifier is yet to come. (19) is a possible answer to the question 'how is the film?' It ascribes the property denoted by the adjective *fascinant* to the referent of the anaphoric subject pronoun *c'* (the film). In this case, the copula is predicational. In comparison with (18) and (19), (20) conveys both identification and predication via the CSPC. However, it is pragmatically ambiguous (Lambrecht, 2004: 180-181). A speaker can use (20) to inform the addressee that the referent of the pronoun *c'* is a fascinating film, in answer to the question 'What is it that you're watching?'. (21) represents this construal schematically:

(21) s[C'est<sub>NP(FOC)</sub>[un film<sub>AP</sub>[passionnant]]]

'It is A FASCINATING MOVIE.'

The whole NP (including the AP *passionnant*) is focal. Identification and predication are on the same level: it is a film (identification) and it is fascinating (predication). The indefinite article determines the intermediate nominal constituent [*film passionnant*]. But (20) could answer a different question: 'How do you like that film?' So construed, (20) is possible only if the extralinguistic referent of *c'* is given. More precisely, the addressee must be aware that what the speaker is watching is a token of the type 'film' (the status of *un* as a marker of tokenization remains unchanged). This time, only the internal NP modifier (i.e. the AP *passionnant*) is in focus:

(22) s[C'est<sub>NP</sub>[un film<sub>AP(FOC)</sub>[passionnant]]]

'It is a FASCINATING movie.'

Identification and predication are not on the same level anymore. Identification is assumed and backgrounded, while predication is foregrounded. A possible paraphrase is: 'what I am watching, which we both know is a film, is fascinating.' At this point, whether or not the copula predicates the property *passionnant* is unclear.

As Lambrecht points out, *être* is “irrelevant for the information structure of the construction” (2004: 180). The same statement is valid for *c’est*<sup>5</sup>. One way of putting our finger on the function of *c’est* in the CSPC is to do a substitution test. Compare:

- (20) C’<sub>i</sub>=est [un film passionnant]<sub>i</sub>  
 it.DEM.PRO=is a movie fascinating  
 ‘That is a fascinating movie.’
- (20’) \*Il<sub>i</sub> est [un film passionnant]<sub>i</sub>  
 it.PERS.PRO is a movie fascinating
- (20’’) [Ce film]<sub>i</sub>, [il<sub>i</sub> est passionnant]  
 DEM.DET movie it is fascinating  
 ‘That’s a fascinating movie.’

In (20’) and (20’’), *il* is a personal pronoun whose referent is inanimate. Interestingly, (20’) is ungrammatical. To express the meaning contained in (20) with *il* instead of *c’est*, a dislocated equivalent is required. The dislocated equivalent places the topic constituent *ce film* in detached position. In (20’’), the topic constituent is in left-detached position, but a right-detached position would be equally acceptable (*il est passionnant, ce film* ‘it is fascinating, this movie’). What blocks the acceptability of (20’) is not the predication of the property *passionnant* (as the acceptability of the right element of (20’’) shows), but the token-type identification. This tendency is confirmed if we do a substitution test when *il* has an animate referent (Boone, 1987; Kupferman, 1979; Pollock, 1983).

- (23) C’=est un linguiste.  
 it.DEM.PRO=is a linguist

<sup>5</sup> In French, *c’est* does have a focalizing function when it is part of a cleft sentence:

*c’est* un film passionnant que je suis en train  
 it=is a movie fascinating that I am in course  
 de voir.  
 of watch-INF  
 ‘What I am watching is a fascinating movie.’

‘He’s a linguist.’

(23’) \**Il est un linguiste.*<sup>6</sup>

He is a linguist

(23’’) *Il est linguiste.*

He is linguist

‘He’s a linguist.’

In (23’), a zero article determines *linguiste*. In French, this is a sign that *linguiste* is to be interpreted neither existentially nor identificationaly (as an answer to ‘what is he?’), but as a subset of properties that qualifies the human referent of *il* (as an answer to ‘what’s his job?’). Predication is thus partial. In contrast, (23’’) accomplishes predication in a way that the occupation identifies the referent. In other words, the scope of the predication is broad enough to identify a token-type relationship in (23), something we do not have in (23’). These tests show that only the *c’est* construction is compatible with both identification and predication. The *il* construction assumes a predicative function only. Why is it so? Consider (24) below:

(24) *Ça, c’est un linguiste.*

DEM.PRO it=is a linguist

‘That’s a linguist.’

The left-detached demonstrative pronoun *ça* points at an element in the (extra)linguistic context that is yet to be identified. Accordingly, Boone (1987) observes that the demonstrative pronoun *c’* notifies the addressee about the existence of a referent to be identified. What follows in the *c’est* construction will provide the information necessary to carry out the type/token identification (1987: 101). Once identification is established, predication can occur in the same NP:

(25) *Ça, c’est un grand linguiste.*

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<sup>6</sup>Pollock (1983) accepts *il est un linguiste* but I consider it highly unnatural in French (whether spoken or written).

DEM.PRO      it=is    a      great    linguist

‘That’s a great linguist.’

An *il* construction equivalent such as (26) below doesn’t work because it implies that identification has been done before and that only a descriptive property can follow:

(26) \*Ça,            *il      est      un      linguiste.*

DEM.PRO      it      is      a      linguist

So far, I have only considered instances of the CSPC that occur with a count NP. Mass NPs are also perfectly acceptable:

(27) *C’=est du                      vin.*

it=is    ART.PART      wine.MASS

‘That’s (some) wine.’

(28) *C’=est            du                      bon      vin.*

it=is                      ART.PART      good    wine.MASS

‘That’s (some) good wine.’

With mass nouns, the general properties of the CSPC remain unchanged. What changes though is the nature of identification. In (27), it is a homogeneous substance (here a measurable portion of liquid) that is tokenized, not a single, countable entity. This substance is identified to the type “wine”. In (28), the identified substance is further predicated with a distinctive property, that of tasting nice. The CSPC displays no preference as regards the count/mass distinction.

To summarize, the CSPC inherits identification and predication from the copular construction, but the CSPC displays a subtle interplay of syntax, semantics, and information structure that is not part of the copular construction. First, the subject of *être* is the anaphoric pronoun *c’*. The anaphoric pronoun *c’* serves as a thematic pivot linking an element in the extralinguistic or linguistic context to what will identify and/or predicate it. The CSPC

assumes two copulative functions. The first is quantitative: the CSPC tokenizes an entity (whether [+count] or [+ mass]) from the (extra)linguistic context. The second function is qualitative: the tokenized entity is identified to a type, and made available for predication. These two functions can perfectly co-occur in the same construction. Identification is the default value, but predication can be foregrounded.

#### 4. The CCDN construction: *ça, c'est de la voiture !*

In this section, I will show that the CCDN construction shares with the CSPC a number of formal and functional properties such as the expression of identification and predication via *c'est*. There are, however, significant differences. For instance, the CCDN conflates identification and predication, and occurs systematically with mass NPs. I will therefore establish that the CCDN and the CSPC do not overlap strictly.

For the analysis that follows, I will use the CCDN construction in (46) as a paradigm example. The schematic representation of the CSPC is duplicated in (30) for clarity's sake:

(29) a. CCDN:  $s[\zeta a, s[c'est_{NP}[du/de\ la/de\ l' N(AP)]]]$

b. *Ça, c'=est de la voiture !*

DEM.TOP it=is ART.PART car.MASS

'That's some car!'

(30) a. CSPC:  $(s)[\zeta a, s[c'est_{NP}[un(e) N (AP)]]]$

b. *Ça, c'=est une belle voiture.*

DEM.TOP it=is ART.INDEF nice car.COUNT

'That's a nice car.'

Comparing the structure in (46) with (30), we notice that the CCDN inherits some syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties from the CSPC:

1. both have two major components: the fusion of the demonstrative pronoun *ce* and the copula *être* (*c'est*) and an NP in predicate position;

2. both rely on anaphoric pronouns (*c'* and optionally *ça*) to connect the NP with some referent from the (extra)linguistic context via identification and predication;
3. both allow for intra-NP predication by means of an optional AP;
4. both assume the pragmatic accessibility of the referent of the demonstrative pronouns.

The CCDN displays distinctive properties:

1. a partitive article determines the predicate NP (*du, de la, de l'*);
2. the predicate NP is construed as mass, even if it is normally countable outside the construction;
3. contrary to what we might expect, count-to-mass conversion profiles a qualitative interpretation of the NP, not a quantitative one.

The CCDN is specific to spontaneous spoken discourse, hence most grammars of French mention it only in passing (e.g. Arrivé et al., 1986: 408). Papers on gradation (Schneidecker, 2010; Whittaker, 2002), partitive articles (Martin, 1983), and polysemy (Victorri, 2002) make sporadic references to (46b). Nicolas (2002: 106-107) includes it in a section on count-to-mass conversions<sup>7</sup>.

Partitive articles are ‘partitive’ because they signal the extraction of a part from a whole and behave like indefinite quantifiers:

(31)	<i>Jeannette boit</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>vin.</i>
	Jeannette drink-PRS.3SG	ART.PART	wine.MASS

‘Jeannette is drinking (some) wine.’

---

<sup>7</sup> None of these works proposes a full-fledged treatment of the CCDN because they rely on examples that are either made up, or borrowed from French literature. This can only be unproductive because the construction is register and medium specific. For instance, there are only 27 instances of the CCDN in Frantext, a 210-million-word reference corpus. The low token frequency of the construction is due to the very nature of the corpus. Frantext is a collection of about 4000 texts in literature, science, and technology spreading over five centuries. Yet, even if one selects all genres on a rather large period of time (I searched over the period 1930-2009), the presence of the construction is hardly noticeable. The same query on French blogs yields several million hits, which I sampled and divided into three datasets (cf. Table 1 and Table 3).

- (32) *Jeannette mange des frites.*  
 Jeannette eat-PRS.3SG ART.PART.PL fries.COUNT.PL  
 ‘Jeannette is eating (some) fries.’

The quantity of wine in (31) can range from a drop, if Jeannette is not used to drinking, to a gallon or more, if Jeannette is a heavy drinker. However, usage shows that partitive articles do not just sample a quantity from a mass or a countable portion from a group of entities. In colloquial French, they also determine nouns that are primarily countable in idiomatic environments:

- (33) *Ils étaient là pour casser du flic.*  
 they were there for bust.INF ART.PART cop.MASS  
 (<http://francedaily.blogspot.com/>)  
 ‘They were there to bust some cop.’

- (34) *Quant à bouffer du curé, ici, je ne m’y risquerai pas.* (<http://correcteurs.blog.lemonde.fr/>)  
 as to eat.INF ART.PART priest.MASS here I NEG  
 PRO=PRO.ADV venture-FUT NEG  
 ‘I won’t even venture to be violently anticlerical.’

- (35) *Il se vend du disque québécois en France.* (<http://blogues.cyberpresse.ca/brunet/>)  
 it REFL sell.-PRS.3SG ART.PART record.MASS French Canadian  
 in France  
 ‘French Canadian records sell rather well in France.’

Count-to-mass conversion (marked by the partitive article) suggests that an indefinite quantity should be quantified numerically. Galmiche captures this kind of conversion by means of a virtual machine that he calls a “multiplier” (1989: 70). The singular, countable referent is

demultiplied when the corresponding count noun is converted to mass. In (33), (34), and (35), *du flic*, *du curé*, and *du disque* have plural referents and translate into ‘several/many cops’, ‘several/many priests’, and ‘several/many records’, respectively. The above examples are well-entrenched phrasal idioms. But in French, count-to-mass conversions occur in virtually any environment that is compatible with partitive articles. Compare (36) and (37):

(36) *Salut, est-ce qu’=il y a des meufs ici ?*

hello interr=PRES ART.PART-PL chick.COUNT.PL

(<http://s8gd.midiblogs.com/>)

‘Hello, are there any chicks in here?’

(37) *Tu ne vas pas t’=ennuyer il y a de la*

you NEG go-PRS.2SG NEG REFL=bore-INF PRES ART.PART.SG

*meuf !!!* (<http://lesmontagnes.canalblog.com/>)

chick.MASS

‘You’re gonna have fun, this place is full of chicks.’

While the *il y a* construction in (36) makes no assumption about the number of “chicks”, the same construction in (37) implies that their number is high, as an effect of count-to-mass conversion.

The CCDN displays count-to-mass conversion too. Table 1 illustrates this with a list of the preferred collocates of the CCDN for three distinct datasets from French blogs<sup>8</sup>. Each dataset hinges on a specific partitive article. Nouns that undergo count-to-mass conversion in the construction are in bold<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Insofar as my data relies on raw frequencies, I cannot make strong generalizations. However, raw frequencies reveal tendencies that we can reasonably exploit given the fact that the construction does not select highly frequent NPs and is context-specific.

<sup>9</sup> So as to decide whether a noun is primarily countable, I used two criteria: 1) the noun is compatible with a numeral article, 2) the entity denoted by the noun in each example is countable. Some nouns are problematic. For instance *photo* can refer either to an art (*la photographie* ‘photography’, a mass noun), or to the product of that art (*une photographie* ‘a photograph’, a count noun). Nouns that work both ways are in bold only if the context shows that the entities they refer to are mostly countable.

**Table 1. Top nominal collocates in the CCDN.**

<i>ça, c'est du _</i> (dataset= 501 constructions)		<i>ça, c'est de la _</i> (dataset= 437 constructions)		<i>ça, c'est de l'_</i> (dataset = 459 constructions)	
N	frequency	N	frequency	N	frequency
<b>commentaire</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>bonne nouvelle</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>info</b>	<b>70</b>
journalisme	8	<b>pub</b>	<b>11</b>	art	19
<b>sport</b>	<b>8</b>	musique	9	<b>article</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>cadeau</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>news</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>innovation</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>bon plan</b>	<b>6</b>	lecture	5	<b>argument</b>	<b>15</b>
bonheur	6	<b>photo</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>organisation</b>	<b>12</b>
rock	6	<b>bagnole</b>	<b>4</b>	amour	11
<b>titre</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>com</b>	<b>4</b>	humour	11
<b>compliment</b>	<b>5</b>	cuisine	4	<b>analyse</b>	<b>9</b>
marketing	5	<b>récup</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>aventure</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>nom</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>balle</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>idée</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>scoop</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>bombe</b>	<b>3</b>	information	8
teasing	5	connerie	3	<b>explication</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>buzz</b>	<b>4</b>	dynamite	3	<b>actu</b>	<b>6</b>
cinéma	4	gourmandise	3	<b>action</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>débat</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>liste</b>	<b>3</b>	ambition	5
<b>service</b>	<b>4</b>	magie	3	argumentation	5
son	4	<b>mise à jour</b>	<b>3</b>	enthousiasme	5
<b>spectacle</b>	<b>4</b>	merde	3	<b>abus</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>test</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>réaction</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>arnaque</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>tuto</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>référence</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>exclu</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>billet</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>répartie</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>investissement</b>	<b>4</b>
chocolat	3	<b>réponse</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>argumentaire</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>colis</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>bécane</b>	<b>2</b>	efficacité	3
<b>concours</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>bêtise</b>	<b>2</b>	engagement	3
design	3	bouillie pour les chats	2	<b>entrée</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>mensonge</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>boulette</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>image</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>mot</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>carte</b>	<b>2</b>	objectivité	3

As expected, Table 1 suffers from thematic bias because all examples are from blogs. Terms in the fields of technology (*photo* ‘photograph’, *mise à jour* ‘update’, *tuto(riel)* ‘tutorial’, *test* ‘test’, *bécane* ‘machine/computer’), computer-mediated communication (*commentaire/com* ‘comment’, *article* ‘article’, *billet* ‘post’, *réponse* ‘reply’, etc.), releases and reviews (*scoop* ‘scoop’, *buzz* ‘buzz’, *info/news/actu* ‘news’, etc.) may be overrepresented. More importantly, the frequency table shows that most preferred nominal predicates in the CCDN undergo a count-to-mass conversion. Nouns that are initially mass remain mass. How should we interpret the count-to-mass interpretation of predicate nominals?

In the CCDN, the effect of count-to-mass conversion is neither the extraction of a part from a whole, nor a demultiplication of the referent. In our paradigm example, the nominal



- (38) *Ça, c'='est une voiture!*  
 DEM.PRO it=is ART.INDEF.SG car.COUNT.SG  
 ‘That’s some car!’
- (39) *Ça, c'='est une vraie voiture!*  
 DEM.PRO it=is ART.INDEF.SG true.ADJ car.COUNT.SG  
 ‘Now, that’s a real car!’
- (40) *Ça, c'='est ce que j' appelle une*  
 DEM.PRO it=is that what I call ART.INDEF.SG  
*voiture!*  
 car.COUNT.SG ‘That’s what I call a car!’

The adjective *vraie*<sup>11</sup> and the metalinguistic structure *ce que j' appelle* make it clear that the speaker does not just identify an instance of real car with the type. Rather, he or she equates the observed qualities of that instance with those of the prototype. In this respect, (39) and (40) are better paraphrases of (46b) than (38). Our datasets show that the CCDN also allows for extra NP qualification (*ça, c'='est du vrai racisme* ‘now, that’s some real racism’), but in significantly smaller proportions. Semantically speaking, extra qualification does not add much to the overall meaning of the CCDN:

- (41) *Wouh houuu ça c'='est de la video qui*  
 INTERJ DEM.PRO it=is ART.PART video that.REL.PR  
*tue !!!* (<http://www.abrutis.com/?q=h3m4n>)  
 kill.3SG  
 ‘Woohoo, that’s some kick-ass video right there!’

<sup>11</sup> See Legallois (2002) for a comprehensive study on the *vrai/véritable* distinction.

Saying that the relative clause *qui tue* creates a subtype of videos within the category ‘video’ would be far-fetched. A more plausible interpretation would be that it strengthens the predominant qualitative function of count-to-mass conversion in the CCDN.

Let’s now turn to the information structure of the CCDN<sup>12</sup>. Compare (42) and (43):

(42) *Alors ça c’=est de la recette !*

then DEM.PRO it=is ART.PART recipe

(<http://brevesdecuisine.canalblog.com/>)

‘Now that’s some recipe!’

(43) *Anne Hathaway, ça c’=est du décolleté!*

Anne Hathaway DEM.PRO it=is ART.PART V-neck

(<http://le-bouzin.com/>)

‘That’s some V-neck dress Anne Hathaway’s wearing!’

In French, the typical referent of the deictic pronoun *ça* is inanimate (*ça* is a contraction of *cela* ‘it/that’). In (42), the referent of *ça* is a recipe on a food blog. The recipe has a topic relation to the proposition that follows since (a) it is the communicative point of departure relative to which predication in the CCDN is assessed, (b) it is thus a potential locus of predication, (c) it is pragmatically accessible in the discourse situation (we can reasonably assume that the recipe is displayed on the food blog and is therefore in the addressee’s consciousness at the time of utterance). Active topical referents are normally coded by pronouns in the propositions that convey predication. As expected, the recipe is coded by means of the bound pronoun *c’* in (42). While the bound pronoun is unstressed, the left-dislocated free pronoun *ça* bears the main sentence stress because it signals a focus relation to the proposition: what  $\langle \textit{ça}, \textit{c’est de la } \_ \rangle$  expresses is non-recoverable at the moment of utterance. *Ça* makes it possible for the construction expressing the proposition to constitute a

<sup>12</sup> In my description of information structure of the CCDN, I adopt Lambrecht’s terminology (2004: 163).

potential locus of predication. In (42), the relationship between the topic (recipe) and the focus (the occurrence of the recipe has all the properties of the ideal recipe) is straightforward. This is not the case in (43), a statement about the plunging neckline of a dress that an American actress is wearing at a reception. *Anne Hathaway* has a topic relation to the proposition expressed by the CCDN and is the focus of predication. The nominal predicate *du décolleté*, which has a focus relation to the proposition, is inanimate and cannot be strictly identified with the animate topic. The relationship between the two is metonymic. *Ça* mediates this metonymic identification between the topic and the nominal predicate. Predication takes the form of a gradation: due to the count-to-mass conversion, the neckline could not be more plunging. Note that (43) is grammatically acceptable without *ça* – the metonymic relationship is then unmediated. The CCDN is flexible enough to accommodate strict or loose identifications and to predicate a gradation.

Substantive adjectives commonly occur in place of nominal predicates. This tendency confirms the qualitative default reading of the CCDN. Conversely, the CSPC does not allow substantive adjectives (*\*ça, c'est une bonne*). Table 2 shows the most frequent adjectives in the *<ça c'est du \_>* dataset<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 2. Top adjectival collocates in the *<ça c'est du \_>* dataset.**

<i>ça, c'est du _</i>	
<i>&lt;ça, c'est du ADJ&gt;</i> total = 96	
dataset = 501 constructions	
SUBST. ADJ	frequency
lourd	29
bon	10
concret	7
rapide	4
jamais vu	3
sérieux	3
beau	2
costaud	2
solide	2
tout bon	2

<sup>13</sup> The *<ça c'est du \_>* dataset is where the most adjectives are found.

The most frequently attested item is by far the gradable adjective *lourd* (which literally means “heavy”)

- (44) *Woaaw ça, c’=est du lourd !*  
 INTERJ DEM.PRO it=is ART.PART heavy.ADJ

(<http://www.webastro.net/forum/>)

‘Wow, that’s heavy stuff!’

In French, *lourd* has almost lost any reference to weight. The same is true of *costaud* ‘hefty’ and *solide* ‘sturdy’, which do not convey any idea of strength in our examples of the CCDN. The end-point of the semantic bleaching of this family of adjectives is the functional expression of a high degree. Equally well represented is (*tout*) *bon* ‘(all) good’, a marker of appreciative value judgment *par excellence*. Table 2 confirms the impression that an appreciative value judgment is the default reading of the CCDN as all adjectives are subject to positive evaluation.

French adjectives agree in gender and number with the noun they qualify. Different agreement constraints apply to substantive adjectives in the CCDN. For example:

- (45) *Les biocombustibles (...), ça c’=est du concret.*  
 biofuel.COUNT.PL DEM it=is ART.PART tangible.ADJ

(<http://www.lasuededurable.com/>)

‘Biofuel, now that’s tangible.’

The topic denotatum *biocombustibles* is countable and in the plural. We expect whatever qualifying structure in the focal domain to be compatible with the countable behavior of the antecedent (e.g. *des choses concrètes* ‘tangible things’). In (45), the sequence <partitive determiner + adjective> *du concret* signals that in the gradable class of tangible elements, biofuels are among those that are the closest to the prototype. To summarize, the behavior of

the CCDN with predicate substantive adjectives is quite similar to that of the same construction with nominals.

The CCDN implements identification and predication in a more flexible way than the CSPC does. The CCDN does not require strict identification between the topic denotatum and the focus domain to express the high degree of a property within a given category. This is a combined effect of <ça c'est>, and the partitive article. If the identification relationship between the topic denotatum and the focus domain is loose, it is most likely metonymic. Section 5 explores the CDN, a similar construction except for the kind of identification it implements, which is generally looser.

### 5. The CDN construction: *c'est de la bombe!*

In this section, I show that the CDN construction is affiliated with the CCDN construction. I will use (46) as a paradigm example of the CDN construction:

(46) *Ce film, c'est de la bombe!*  
DEM.DET movie.COUNT it=is ART.PART bomb.MASS

(<http://forum.lechapitre.org/index.php?action=printpage;topic=3643.0>)

'That movie is awesome!'

The CCDN and the CDN constructions are formally and functionally similar. Both hinge on the copular subject-predicate pattern with a partitive article and a nominal predicate that is construed as mass. As in the CCDN, the [+ mass] interpretation of the nominal predicate in the CDN has a qualitative function: it expresses high degree in a value judgment. Despite the similarities, the CCDN and the CDN are not strictly identical. In the paragraphs that follow, I will unfold the main distinctive properties of the CDN.

Like the CCDN, the CDN also has preferred nominal predicates. I list them in Table 3 (hapax legomena are in grey).

**Table 3. Top nominal collocates in the CDN.**

<i>c'est du _</i> (dataset= 72 constructions)		<i>c'est de la _</i> (dataset= 175 constructions)		<i>c'est de l' _</i> (dataset = 18 constructions)	
N	frequency	N	frequency	N	frequency
(grand) n'importe	20	(pure/vraie)	74	or	15
quoi		merde		air en barre	1
vent	9	balle	19	enculage	1
gâteau	8	bombe	18	enculerie	1
boulot	6	(pure) folie	13		
grand art	5	connerie	6		
pipeau	4	foutaise	6		
pipi de chat	4	gnognote	5		
pain béni	3	dynamite	4		
génie	2	poudre aux yeux	4		
néant	2	(bonne) daube	4		
pur bonheur	2	branlette	3		
caca	1	petite bière	3		
flan	1	(franche) rigolade	3		
haut vol	1	roupie de			
portenawak	1	sansonnet	2		
super boulot	1	(bonne) came	2		
tout cuit	1	bouillie pour les			
		médias	1		
		bullshit	1		
		chite	1		
		(grande/pure)			
		classe			
		merdasse	1		
		mouise	1		
		prouesse	1		
		saloperie	1		

For each dataset, the type frequency of the CDN is relatively small, especially if we compare it to the type frequency of the CCDN (Section 4, Table 2). This is because the CDN is more colloquial and therefore more register-specific. The informality of the CDN is particularly striking in two datasets, *<c'est de la \_>* and *<c'est de l' \_>*, where a significant number of the preferred NPs are typical of foul language. Some NPs make explicit reference to sex (*branlette* 'wank' *enculage/enculerie* 'fuck'), and others to excrements (*caca* 'poo', *merde/merdasse/chite/bullshit/mouise* 'shit', *pipi de chat* 'cat piss'). *Merde* is by far the most frequently attested item, along with frame-related variants (*merdasse, mouise*, etc.) This is hardly surprising since *merde* has grammaticalized to the point where it hardly denotes excrements anymore, but predicates negative qualities regardless of the physical composition of the referent. Due to its high overall frequency in French, it can hardly count as a distinctive

collocate of the CDN. By contrast, the CDN attracts *balle* ‘ball’ and *bombe* ‘bomb’ more significantly. All three datasets are unequally represented. The structure <*c’est de la* \_> attracts the most NPs, followed by <*c’est du* \_>. In the syntactic frame of <*c’est de l’*\_>, collocational preferences are much less varied. But with a token frequency of 15 in a dataset that counts 18 constructions, *c’est de l’or* can be considered as representative of the CDN construction.

Each construction individually maps syntactic and prosodic components onto the information structure of the proposition. In the CCDN, we expect an emphatic stress on the left-dislocated deictic pronoun *ça* (topic), whereas in the CDN the stress will be on the nominal predicate in focus position. Compare the following examples:

(47) CCDN *ÇA, c’est de la voiture !*

(48) CDN *Ce film, c’est de la BOMBE !*

In (47), *voiture* does not bear the main stress because the category has been evoked in prior discourse and is therefore pragmatically available. In (48), the main stress is on *bombe*, because its association with the topic *ce film* is non-recoverable from the context at the moment of utterance. Stress placement rules reflect how the NP predicates a quality of the subject in each construction. In (47), the NP *voiture* predicates a quality of the pragmatically accessible referent of the subject pronoun *c’*, namely “the car”, which is marked as a locus of predication by the deictic pronoun *ça*. The CCDN implements identification and predication via *intrinsic* identification because the occurrence of the car is compared to the prototype of its own category.

The CDN works differently. In (46), it predicates a quality of the film via *extrinsic* identification, because *bombe* is not part of the category ‘film’. Since *bombe* is used figuratively, it can predicate virtually anything that the speaker considers excellent such as music, people, and clothes. In the previous section, I established that whether the CCDN

predicates appreciative or unappreciative quality depends mostly on the meaning of the nominal predicate. The same observation applies to the CDN<sup>14</sup>. In our datasets, NPs that contribute to an unappreciative value judgment are not limited to the frame of taboo concepts. Equally significant are the terms that denote nonsense (*connerie* ‘bullshit’, *foutaise* ‘hogwash’), trifling or worthless matters (*gnognotte* ‘worthless thing’, *roupie de sansonnet* ‘load of rubbish’, *franche rigolade* ‘good laugh’, *n’importe quoi*, *portenawak* ‘nonsense, rubbish’, *néant* ‘nothingness’), expressions that connote deception (*poudre aux yeux*, ‘smoke and mirrors’, literally ‘eye powder’), and immateriality (*vent* ‘wind’, *pipeau* ‘no great shakes’, literally ‘reed-pipe music’). On the other hand, NPs that express an appreciative value judgment belong to the frames of explosives (*bombe* ‘bomb’, *dynamite* ‘dynamite’), precious metal (*or* ‘gold’), work ethics (*boulot* ‘job’), art (*grand art* ‘great art’), achievements (*haut vol* ‘high fly’, *prouesse* ‘feat’), and elegance (*classe* ‘class’).

Depending on the preferred NP, food-related metaphors can express appreciative or unappreciative value judgments. *Flan* ‘custard tart’, *daube* ‘casserole’, *petite bière* ‘small beer’, and *bouillie* ‘gruel’ connote poor quality. On the other hand *c’est du gâteau* has the same meaning as its English equivalent ‘that’s a piece of cake’. If we reverse the polarity of *c’est du gâteau*, another nominal predicate of the same frame is preferred:

(49) *La* *grammaire*, *c’est pas* *de la* *tarte*.  
 The grammar it=is NEG ART.PART pie.MASS

(<http://correcteurs.blog.lemonde.fr/>)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> To a lesser extent, the nature of the value judgment depends also on whether the nominal predicate is modified by an adjective. For example, the mass noun *camelote* is a slang word referring to poor-quality goods. Its default connotation is unappreciative (‘junk’, ‘rubbish’). When *camelote* is modified by the adjective *bonne* ‘good’, its connotation switches to appreciative (‘good stuff’). The same is true of *came* ‘dope’, a contraction of *camelote*. In *c’est de la bonne came* (Table 3), the adjective *bonne* selects the appreciative connotation of *came* ‘good stuff’. But even a positive adjective such as *bon(ne)* can be interpreted negatively. The count noun *daube* ‘casserole’ is a culinary term whose default connotation is neutral. When it is used figuratively, it is a mass noun. It is then a near synonym of *camelote* ‘junk’. In the <*c’est de la* > dataset, the adjective in *c’est de la bonne daube* (literally ‘this is a good casserole’, figuratively ‘that’s a pile of junk’) emphasizes the unappreciative connotation of *daube* in a figurative context.

<sup>15</sup> *C’est pas du gâteau* is possible, but not as frequent as the *tarte* equivalent.

‘Grammar is no picnic.’

Switching the grammatical polarity of the construction does not mechanically reverse the value judgment. This is a sign that the CDN construction is idiomatic and non-compositional.

Most of the preferred collocates in the CDN have undergone semantic bleaching. This is consistent with the fact that the CDN carries out predication via extrinsic identification between the topical referent and the nominal predicate. Indeed, the meaning of the preferred collocates is loose enough to be compatible with a variety of discourse situations. However, as (50) shows, semantic bleaching does not prevent speakers from reactivating the literal meaning of the nominal predicate to achieve special communicative effects:

(50) CDN: *C’=est de la bombe (atomique).* (Telrama.fr)

it=is ART.PART bomb (atomic)

‘This is awesome + related to the atomic bomb.’

(50’) CCDN: ?*Ça, c’=est de la bombe (atomique).*

DEM it=is ART.PART bomb.MASS (atomic)

‘That’s some (atomic) bomb?’

(50) is a headline from a French weekly magazine. The NP *de la bombe* is coindexed with the pronoun *c’*, whose referent is a major scandal involving a famous French news anchor. The CDN treats the referent of *c’* (i.e. the scandal, whose details the reporter gives in the article) as pragmatically accessible to the readers. The construction performs two functions. First, it converts the NP *bombe* from count to mass. The effect is figurative: the scandal has the same impact as a bomb when it explodes. Second, given that the rumors are about the anchor’s partiality regarding the misdemeanors of a nuclear reprocessing company, it reactivates the literal meaning of *bombe* via the metonymic association with *atomique*. The CCDN equivalent in (50’) is odd because the NP *bombe* is coindexed with the pronoun *c’*, whose referent we expect to be a real atomic bomb. Because *c’est de la bombe* is a recent addition to

the CDN paradigm<sup>16</sup>, it seems that the literal meaning of *bombe* is still quite active. Example (51) further illustrates the interplay between the figurative meaning and the literal meaning in *c'est de la bombe*:

- (51) *C'=est de la bombe, et elle est à retardement.* (<http://www.20minutes.fr>)  
 delay
- it=is ART.PART bomb.MASS and it is at

'That's some movie, with long-lasting effects on the audience.'

Here, the CDN predicates an appreciative quality on the basis of the loose reference of *bombe*. The referent is Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*. This movie on mine-clearance experts in Iraq is excellent and will have long-lasting effects on the audience. Moreover, since mines belong to the frame of explosives, along with bombs, the journalist reactivates the literal meaning of the nominal predicate.

In the structure *c'est de la balle*, the etymology of *balle* 'ball' is comparatively obscure<sup>17</sup>. Yet, this idiom is quite a common way of expressing a positive value judgment on the contextual referent in spoken French:

- (52) *L' Ipad, c'=est de la balle !* (<http://www.iphonezine.fr/>)  
 the Ipad.COUNT it =is ART.PART ball.MASS

'The Ipad rocks!'

The identification between the referent (*Ipad*) and the nominal predicate (*balle*) is loose. The CDN allows for stricter identification if the communicative context requires it:

- (53) *Jabulani, c'=est pas de la balle !*  
 Jabulani it=is NEG ART.PART ball.MASS

<sup>16</sup> A French rap band supposedly popularized the expression in the 1990s.

<sup>17</sup> In a forum on French idioms, participants dedicate a whole section to *c'est de la balle* (<http://www.languefrancaise.net/forum/viewtopic.php?id=1051>, last accessed online on October 11, 2010). The origin of the phrasal idiom is so remote that the vast majority of explanations are nothing but folk theories.

(<http://www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1508/Canal-Sports/index.dhtml>)

‘The Jabulani sucks.’

Here, the CDN predicates a negative quality of the referent. The soccer ball that comes under the name of *Jabulani* has almost none of the properties of the category ‘soccer ball’. The CDN predicates a negative quality via the rejection of a strict identification between the referent and the nominal predicate, whose literal meaning is activated on purpose. Folk etymology is clearly at work, and whether or not *balle* originally refers to a real ball is irrelevant in the CDN.

The CDN implements identification and predication in a significantly more flexible way than the CCDN does. In the CCDN, even if the identification between the topic denotatum and the focus domain is loose, it is still possible to relate the two (e.g. metonymically). In the CDN, the identification relationship between the topic denotatum and the focus domain is looser. The copular subject-predicate structure relies heavily on idiomatic entrenchment. Entrenchment is visible at the level of the preferred nominal predicates. As in the CCDN, count-to-mass conversion in the CDN has a qualitative function.

## 6. Conclusion

I hope to have shown the assets of a constructional approach to the count/mass distinction over ontological and NP-centered approaches. Linguists should treat ontological approaches to count and mass nouns with caution because speakers rarely construe the world in terms of molecular physics or quantum mechanics. NP-centered approaches are also limited because they predict neither the distribution of count nouns and mass nouns nor the semantic effects of conversions.

I analyzed a count-to-mass conversion in two partially-filled idiomatic constructions that inherit their syntactic structure from the Copular Subject Predicate Construct, namely the

CCDN (*ça, c'est de la voiture !*) and the CDN (*cette voiture, c'est de la bombe !*). In these constructions, the expressions of identification and predication hinge on count-to-mass conversion at the level of the nominal predicate, as well as on other constructional components that are not restricted to that NP. In the CCDN, the referent of the subject *c'* is identified with the prototype of the category denoted by the nominal predicate. In the CDN, the same phenomenon occurs, but identification is looser. In either case, the conversion does not convey any idea of a 'mass' per se because the conversion does not participate in the expression of quantity<sup>18</sup>. Count-to-mass conversion has a qualitative function.

Central to my description of the CCDN and the CDN is the distribution of nouns after (*ça*) *c'est du/de la/de l'* with respect to their meanings (appreciative, unappreciative, neutral) and types (count vs. mass). In this paper though, I have adopted a qualitative approach. I have deliberately refrained from making strong generalizations based on raw frequencies (Tables 1, 2, and 3). Corpus linguists might object that I could have proposed at least two collocation-based alternatives to raw counts (Sinclair, 1991; Gries, 2006). One would have used mutual information or collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003) to determine whether a given noun occurs with a construction more often than expected. Another would have contrasted the CSPC, the CCDN, and the CDN in their distinctive collocational preferences using distinctive collexeme analysis (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004). Such statistics rely on closed corpora, so as to enable comparisons between individual token frequencies and overall token frequencies. The web as a corpus is clearly an asset for the study of emerging constructions such as the CCDN and the CDN because their distribution in traditional French corpora is too scarce and too sparse. I used the web as a corpus to compile my datasets, but this methodology suffers from serious drawbacks such as replication, biased random extraction, lack of systematic annotation, and above all the impossibility to compute overall

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<sup>18</sup> The incompatibility of the 'converted' NP with quantifiers such as *un peu de* 'a little' brings further evidence for this: e.g. *\*c'est un peu de voiture* 'that's a little car'; *\*c'est un peu de bombe*, 'that's a little bomb'.

frequencies reliably. It will be the goal of a subsequent paper to explore the same case studies from a quantitative perspective, with robust statistics. These statistics will have to be based on a closed corpus, preferably from the web, using the ‘web *for* corpus’ approach, i.e. the web as a resource to create a corpus, as opposed to the ‘web *as* corpus’ approach, i.e. using search engines to extract data from the web.

Despite the absence of statistics per se, I can nevertheless formulate the following claims, based on the observation of my datasets. The CSPC is so productive that collocation patterns are not easy to discern. Such is not the case of the CCDN and the CDN, whose collocational possibilities are more limited. While the CSPC is well entrenched as a schematic construction, the CCDN and the CDN are entrenched as lexically-instantiated constructions. In other words, specific instances of the CCDN and the CDN constructions with certain nouns are highly representative of the constructions and have the status of symbolic units in the grammars of speakers (e.g. *ça c'est de la bagnole* for the CCDN and *c'est de la merde/balle/bombe* for the CDN). I infer that the CDN inherits properties from the CCDN, which in turn inherits properties from the CSPC. All three constructions form a hierarchical constructional network endowed with relatively high predictive power as to the locus of count-to-mass conversion.

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