

French exclamative sluices: a corpus study

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Elliptical clauses have been analysed as underlyingly sentential (Ross, 1969; Merchant, 2001), or as *sui generis* dialogically–specified constructions (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000; Culicover & Jackendoff, 2005). We focus on exclamative (Excl.) sluices, which have received less attention than interrogatives. Ginzburg’s (2019) analysis of the spoken part of the BNC, COCA, and London Lund Corpus reveals that: (i) Excl. sluices are more prevalent than sentential Excl.; (ii) Excl. sluices cannot be embedded, unlike sentential Excl. and interrogative sluices; and (iii) Excl. sluices are predominantly interpreted as exophoric and frequently lack a clear verbal paraphrase. These results highlight the difference between Excl. sluices and Excl. clauses, which supports the dialogical “direct interpretation” approach. We consider French, which has a variety of Excl. constructions; Abeillé & Godard (2021): sluices (1), sentential verbless (Laurens, 2008) (2), and verbal constructions (3) (Laurens, 2008; Abeillé & Godard, 2021).

- (1) Quel beau samedi ! ‘what a lovely Saturday!’ (Sabatier, 1980)
- (2) [Quel grand gosse, celui-là], sourit Armoire en secouant la tête.
‘What a great kid, this one, Armoire smiled while shaking his head.’ (Benoziglio, 1980)
- (3) Quel fameux tandem nous formions.
‘What an excellent tandem we made.’ (Garat, 2022)

We searched the Frantext database (after 1980) for Excl. with “*combien* + A” (‘*how* + adj’), “*quel* + (A) + N”, (‘*what a* + (A) + N’), and “*que* + *de* + (Adj) + N”. We annotated several factors: construction (sluice or not), verbless or not, matrix (including reported speech) or not, and interpretation: Recent Question Under Discussion (RQUD) (4), Recent Referent (RRef) (5), or Exophoric/Inferential (ExInf) (6), cf. Ginzburg (2019).

- (4) Elle s’y est bien mise à la cuisine, [...] quelle bonne surprise.
‘[...] she has really started to cook, [...] what a nice surprise.’ (Ernaux, 1981)
- (5) Était-ce un exercice ? Mais alors combien coûteux !
‘Was it an exercise? But then how expensive!’ (Blocher-Saillens, 1998)
- (6) [...] «Fait beau aujourd’hui.» «Oui, quel magnifique automne.»
‘“Nice weather today.” “Yes, what a magnificent autumn!”’ (Hanf, 2013)

For *combien* + adj, which has a formal register, we have a higher frequency of sentential Excl. (sluice rate 12.8%), and they were more often embedded (e.g. (7)), unlike sluices (e.g. (5)) (see Table 1).

- (7) C’est à de tels moments [...] qu’on sent [combien forts sont les liens qui vous unissent à une ville] ‘It is in such moments [...] that one feels [how strong the bonds are that unite you to a city]’.
(Juliet, 1994)

For *quel* + A + N, we found a higher proportion of sluices (sluice rate 57%), which were never embedded, unlike sentential Excls. (11 out of 95 cases) (Table 2). For *que* + *de* + (Adj) + N + (Adj), sluices outnumber sentential exclamatives (sluice rate 84.7%, Table 3), with no embedded examples. By comparison, French interrogatives exhibit a lower sluice rate (30% in Lefeuve’s 2020 spoken corpus (ESLO) and 17% in Reinhardt’s 2019 corpus of detective novels).

For *combien* + A sluices, the only reading found is RRef (e.g. 5), while the interpretations attested with *quel* + A + N sluices are more diverse: ExInf (34.13%) (8), RRef (32.54%) (9), RQUD (23.02%) (10) and the rest have ambiguous readings (10.32%) (Table 3).

- (8) La communion, cette nuit... Quel horrible vide en moi
‘The communion, this night... What a horrible emptiness in me.’ (Mauriac, 1988)

- (9) On part [...] à la Guajira (quel joli nom, tu ne trouves pas ?)
 'We leave [...] to Guajira (what a lovely name, don't you think?) (Olivès, 2013).
- (10) Je pensais aux premiers hommes qui s'étaient rassemblés un jour, quelque part, pour s'organiser un peu et se préserver ainsi de quelques maux. Quelle bonne idée !
 'I was thinking about the first men who had gathered one day, somewhere, to organize themselves a little and thus protect themselves from some hardships. What a good idea!' (François, 2016)

For the *quel* + N + ! sluices, the most common interpretation is ExInf (39.8%), then RQUD (34.6%) and RRef (24.1%), with one embedded example (11).

- (11) - Oh là... vous n'imaginez pas [à quel point]!
 - 'Oh there... you can't imagine [to what extent]' Dorin, 1997)

For *que* + *de* + (Adj) + N + (Adj), we found 69.2% ExInf (12), 10.5% RQUD (13), 10.5% RRef (14) and 9.8% are ambiguous.

- (12) J'ai préféré attendre sagement sur les boulevards le passage des troupes. [Que de monde !]
 'I preferred to wait patiently on the boulevards for the passage of the troops. Such a crowd!' (Auroy, 2008)
- (13) [O]n aime faire l'amour et on déteste la dépendance où cela peut vous conduire... [Que de complications enrichissantes] ...
 'We love making love and we hate the dependency that it can lead us to... So many enriching complications!' (Groult, 2008)
- (14) Et Eugène, [...]. Et Adèle, [...]. [que de revenants]
 'And Eugène, [...]. And Adèle, [...]. so many returners...' (Pontalis, 2003)

In summary, we show that Excl. sluices in French were not found embedded, unlike sentential Excls and interrogative sluices. Furthermore, the constructions *quel* + A + N and *que de*+(A)+N+(A) were found to occur predominantly as sluices in French, with a notable exophoric interpretation. These findings, which both distinguish the properties of interrogative and exclamative sluices and the properties of exclamative clauses and sluices, are consistent with the dialogically-constructionist, direct interpretation approach. They are difficult for sententialist theories, which expect uniformity between non-sentential and sentential constructions and across apparently similar non-sentential constructions.

		Sluice	Verbless (with subject)	Verbal	Total
<i>combien</i>	Embedded	0	0	16	16
	Matrix/Coord	5	10	8	24
	Total	5	10	24	39
<i>quel</i>	Embedded	0	0	11	11
	Matrix/Coord	126	35	49	210
	Total	126	35	60	221
<i>que de</i>	Embedded	0	0	0	0
	Matrix/Coord	133	23	1	157
	Total	133	23	1	157

Table 1: Exclamatives in Frantext (after 1980)

Semantic interpretation	<i>quel</i> +A+N	<i>combien</i> +A	<i>que de</i> +(A)+N+(A)
ExInf	43 (34.13%)	0	92 (69.2%)
RRef	41 (32.54%)	5 (100%)	14 (10.5%)
RQUD	29 (23.02%)	0	14 (10.5%)
Ambiguous readings	13 (10.32%)	0	13 (9.8%)
Total sluices	126	5	133

Table 2: Semantic interpretation of Excl. sluices in Frantext (after 1980)

References

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