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The structure of simple sentences in Breton - Arguments for an RRG treatment*

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1. Introduction

One important insight of RRG is the parallel architecture framework (Jackendoff 2002, Van Valin 2023) that links different modules which are independent, but interact with one another. Those modules comprise syntax, semantics and discourse pragmatics. In this paper I focus on the syntax-discourse interplay in a relatively under-studied language, Breton, which displays an unusual syntax and defies typological classification. One important assumption of RRG is that “grammar includes both general principles that have cross-linguistic or cross-constructional validity and an inventory of Constructional Schemas, which provide construction-specific instructions” (Bentley 2024: 252). Two RRG general principles that are relevant for this paper are:

1) the absence of a special status for the notions of subject or D.O., which are construction-specific, with discourse directly relevant for the choice of word order (Shimojo 2024); Breton offers a striking illustration of this principle: the notion of subject as PSA does not hold in this language, contrary to French or English.

2) as noted by Van Valin, “the pervasive role of discourse-pragmatics in grammar” (Van Valin 2005: 182), which directly influences the selection of syntactic templates taking place in the linking of semantics to syntax. For a given propositional content, Breton has five different syntactic templates, none of which is derived from or more basic than the other.

In accounting for the choice of those syntactic templates, we use the information-structure notion of salience (Shimojo 2024, Charcos 2009), which concerns “the relationships between how the information is coded in sentences and the linguistic contexts in which the sentences are used” (Shimojo 2024:1), and we develop the notion of addressee-oriented salience in particular.

Breton is a continental Celtic minority language, spoken in the west of France (Brittany). It is known for its different sentence patterns to express a similar propositional content. In the first part, we present the sentence patterns or syntactic templates, which raises the issue of grammatical relations in that language. In the second part, we turn to the discourse-pragmatic motivations for the different templates, relying on the concept of salience of information. In the last part, we show the result of a corpus study in order to zero in on the discourse motivations for those syntactic patterns. In sum, the goal of this paper is to wonder to what extent the syntax of the Breton sentence benefits from an RRG treatment.

2. Inventory of sentence patterns (syntactic templates) in Breton.

2.1. The PSA

French and English exemplify SVO languages in which the first slot in the information-neutral assertive declarative sentence is the subject, which is aligned with the Actor role, and the object, aligned with the Undergoer role, as in (1).

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- (1) a. *I eat an apple every morning*
 b. *Je mange une pomme tous les matins*
 Subject V Object Adverbial/ Adjunct

The subject in (1a,b) is the *Privileged Syntactic Argument*, i.e. the “argument that is the controller or pivot of a restricted neutralization of semantic roles for grammatical purposes, generally referent tracking (i.e. keeping track of who is doing what in discourse). [The PSA in French or English is the] Actor of transitive V, of intransitive V, Undergoer of intransitive, Undergoer of transitive – passive” (La Polla 2023: 272). Even if the adverbial can be fronted, as in (2), the subject remains pre-verbal.

- (2) a. *Every morning I eat an apple.*
 b. *Tous les matins je mange une pomme.*

In terms of discourse-pragmatics, (1a, b) can serve as felicitous answers to many questions: *What do you do every morning? What do you eat every morning? When do you eat an apple?*, etc.

2.2. The syntactic templates of Breton

Now, for each of these discourse situations, Breton has a different sentence type. Breton is described as a language in which word order is free; the first slot can be anything: the subject, the direct or indirect object, an adverbial/adjunct, even the non-finite form of the verb. The only requirements are that the inflected verb be second (it is a “tense-2” language) and that two verbal particles, *A* or *E* occupy the immediate pre-verbal position. Breton has no case morphology like nominative, accusative, dative, etc. So, the sentences “*I eat an apple every morning / Je mange une pomme tous les matins*” can be expressed in five different ways, none of which is more basic or frequent than the other; these are not information-packaging variants:

- **Pattern I** has an obligatorily expressed (pro)nominal subject first, followed by the *A* particle; the verb has to remain uninflected for person.

- (3) *Me a zebr-Ø un aval bep mintin*
 1SG *A* eat an apple every morning

- **Pattern II** has the D.O. first¹; the verb bears a person and tense inflection (1st person present -*an* in the example), and the personal pronoun subject must not be expressed; again, the *A* particle is present.

- (4) *Un aval a zebr-an bep mintin*
 an apple *A* eat -SG.PR every morning

In (3) and (4), the *A* particle immediately precedes the verb; *A* encodes an obligatory syntactic relation between the pre-verbal constituent and the verb. But other syntactic functions than subject and D.O. are involved, which makes it difficult to state a generalization in terms of semantic argument. The grammars of Breton recognize another syntactic function, called “anticipated complement”, placed pre-verbally (5, 6, 7).

¹ Of course, this pattern is not available in the case of intransitive verbs (see the example in table 1 below).

- (5) Ma breur *a* *bren-in* *al* *levre-se* evitañ
 my brother *A* buy-1SG.FUT this book for-him
 ‘I’ll buy this book for my brother.’
- (6) Pêr *a* *zo melen* *e* vlev
 Pêr *A* be yellow his hair
 ‘Peter’s hair is yellow / Peter has yellow hair.’
- (7) An tele *a* *blij-Ø* *d’ar vugale* *sellout* outañ.
 the television *A* please to-the-children look at-it
 ‘The children like to watch TV.’

In (5), *ma breur*, “my brother”, is the recipient argument and an indirect object; in (6), *e vlev*, “his hair”, is the possessed entity and head of a noun complement; in (7), *an tele*, “the TV”, is a target/goal argument and a prepositional object. Those NPs are called anticipated complements (Desbordes 1983, Urien 1987) because they are fronted (in first position) and have an obligatory (anaphoric) syntactic relation with a final constituent, underlined in the examples. In all the examples from (3) to (6), the first slot NPs need not be macrorole direct core arguments, but the *A* particle sets up a particular type of grammatical relation, which is an obligatory/anaphoric type of relation; therefore, neither the subject nor the D.O have a special status in Breton. We will see in section 2 that “it is the identification of the [...] pragmatic role of the referent in an event or state of affairs that is relevant to the concept of grammatical relations. ...grammatical relations are conventionalized associations of position of the referring expression, etc.” (Lapolla 2023: 270–271).

But the story does not end here: the first slot can be filled by the main verb in the infinitive, with the *A* particle before the tensed auxiliary, and that is pattern III:

- **Pattern III** is called the “auxiliary conjugation”; the lexical verb *debriñ*, “eat”, is in the infinitive form; the person and tense inflections are carried by the dummy auxiliary *ober* (*ran*), “do”, preceded by the *A* particle.

- (8) *Debriñ* *a* *r-an* *un aval* *bep* *mintin*.
 eat *A* do-1SG.PR an apple every morning

The fact that we find the *A* particle again shows that grammatical relations in Breton can be expressed in terms of semantic macrorole argument only in a very broad sense: *A* implies a core argument/complement, but not necessarily Actor or Undergoer, as in example (8) the infinitive verb is the complement of the verb “do”. In this paper, we do not explore the semantics-to-syntax linking in detail, but focus on the syntax-to-discourse linking; suffice it to say that the *A* particle occurs in particular syntactic templates, in which a core syntactic relation is present. This differentiates it from the *E* particle, to which we turn now, with pattern IV.

- **Pattern IV** has an adjunct (a non-core argument) in the first slot, with the verb bearing the person and tense inflection (*-an*); the personal pronoun subject must not be expressed, and this time the particle is *E*.

- (9) *Bep mintin* *e* *tebr-an* *un aval*.
 every morning *e* eat-1.SG.PR an apple

Interestingly, examples (5), (6), and (7) can be alternatively expressed using this pattern, if we choose to front the indirect complement/predicative complement/prepositional complement.

(5') *Evid ma breur e pren-in al levr-se*
for my brother *e* buy -1SG.FUT this book

(6') *Melen e-o vlev Pêr*
yellow *e*-be hair Pêr

(7') *Ouzh an tele e plij d'ar vugale sellout.*
at the television *e* please to the children look

To round up the discussion on how to say *I eat an apple (every morning)* in Breton, a fifth pattern is available:

- **Pattern V** is a non-finite serial construction with the main verb in the infinitive, introduced by the preposition/particle *da*, “to”, and the subject preceded by the coordinating conjunction *ha*, “and”; this pattern is particularly frequent in narration.

(10) *Ha me da debriñ un aval...*
and I to eat an apple
'Then I ate an apple...'

To recapitulate: a given propositional content, in a declarative transitive sentence, can be expressed by using five syntactic templates, which are all truth-conditionally equivalents.

Pattern I > *Int a zebr-Ø un aval bep mintin*
they *A* eat-Ø an apple each morning

Pattern II > *Un aval a zebr-ont bep mintin*
an apple *A* eat- 3PL.PR each morning
Pêr a zo vlev e melen
Peter *A* be yellow his hair

Pattern III > *Debr-iñ a r-eont un aval bep mintin*
eat-INF *a* do-3PL.PR an apple each morning
OR:
Debr-iñ un aval a r-eont
Eat- INF an apple *a* do-3PL.PR

Pattern IV > *Bep mintin e tebr-ont un aval*
each morning *e* eat-3PL.PR an apple

Pattern V > *Ha me da debriñ un aval*
and I to eat an apple

Tables 1 and 2 below are more complete, as they include the syntactic templates with the semantic macroroles in the 2nd column:

Slot 1 : syntactic core	semantic role : macrorole core argument	Parti cle <i>A</i>	T2 constraint : verb	Other elements
(1) core element : → (pro)nominal subject <i>Me / Yann</i> I/ Yann <i>Un aval</i> an apple <i>Un aval</i> an apple	Actor of transitive V Undergoer of intransitive V Undergoer of transitive passive	<i>A</i>	<i>zebr-Ø</i> eat - Ø <i>gouezhas</i> fell- Ø <i>vez debret</i> be- Ø eaten	<i>un aval bep mintin</i> an apple each morning <i>bep mintin</i> each morning
(2) core element (DO, IO, AC): <i>An aval</i> an apple <i>Ma breur</i> my brother <i>Pêr</i> Peter	Undergoer : - Patient - Benefactive - Possessor	<i>A</i>	<i>zebr-an</i> eat-1SG.PR <i>bren-in</i> buy-1 SG.FUT <i>zo</i> be-Ø	<i>bep mintin</i> each morning <i>al levr-se evitañ</i> this book for-him <i>melen e vlev</i> yellow his hair
(3) core element : → verbal noun (infinitive) <i>Debr-iñ</i> eat-INF	No semantic role : Event ?	<i>A</i>	<i>r-an</i> do-1SG.PR	<i>un aval bep mintin</i> an apple each morning

Table 1: syntax, semantics and sentence structure with particle *A*

Slot 1 : syntactic oblique/non-core	Semantic role : non-macrorole oblique argument	Particle <i>E</i>	T2 constraint : verb	Other elements
(4) oblique element : <i>Mat</i> Good <i>Bep mintin</i> each morning <i>Er gegin</i> in the kitchen <i>Buan</i> quickly	- pred. cplt with <i>be</i> -time / frequency - place - manner, etc.	<i>E</i>	<i>(e)o</i> is <i>tebr-an</i> eat -1SG.PR <i>tebr-an</i> eat -1SG.PR <i>tebr-an</i> eat -1SG.PR	<i>an aval</i> the apple <i>un aval</i> an apple <i>un aval</i> an apple <i>un aval</i> an apple
(5) Subordinate adjunct clause <i>Pa'z ae da di e vamm</i> whenver he went to his mother's	- time	<i>E</i>	<i>tebr-e</i> eat -1SG.IMP	<i>un aval</i> an apple
(6) Progressive construction <i>O tebriñ un aval</i> PROG eat an apple	- in progress	<i>E</i>	<i>oa-n</i> be-1SG.IMP	

Table 2: syntax, semantics and sentence structure with particle *E*

3. The discourse-pragmatic motivations for these templates

The issue at this stage of the discussion is what motivates these different syntactic templates. RRG insists on the pervasiveness of discourse-pragmatics in the different word orderings that are found across languages. Breton is a striking illustration of that principle. Pedagogical grammars of Breton have observed that the element occupying the first slot in the sentence is the “leader”, the “point of departure”, the “key word” or “most important element” of the sentence, and determines the choice of the pattern. Several scholars have shown that the immediate pre-verbal constituent (the first slot) is called an “addressee-oriented focal (*focale allocutive*” in French, Bottineau 2010), which is taken to mean that Breton syntax constrains the speaker to hierarchize the informational chain according to (what the speaker believes are) the expectations of the addressee (Denez 1986); any semantic element can be a focal, as we have shown in the presentation of the templates, and its semantic status (core or non-core argument) is encoded by means of the two verbal particles. Again, paraphrasing LaPolla, we can say that “It is the identification of the semantic and/or pragmatic role of the referent in an event or state of affairs that is relevant to the concept of grammatical relations.” (LaPolla 2023: 270–271, our underlining). To give an idea of the notion of addressee-oriented focal and the impression of syntax being constructed “on-line” in Breton, consider example (6) again:

- (6) *Pêr a zo melen e vlev*
Peter a be yellow his hair

The meaning of the whole sentence can be interpreted only when the addressee gets to the final part of the sentence and can reconstruct *vlev Pêr*, “Peter’s hair”; it is the speaker that is responsible for the dislocation of the complement, and the choice of placing *Pêr* in the first slot; this sentence would be used if *Pêr* is in focus, in a description of the character, for example.

The concept of salience status (in the sense of “cognitive prominence of information”, Shimojo 2024: 8) in relation with constituent ordering is crucial in this discussion. According to Shimojo, pragmatic influence on word ordering concerns the selection of appropriate syntactic templates for the target sentence; “of particular relevance [...] is the assumption that the speaker’s choice of certain linguistic forms is systematically related to the speaker’s assumptions about the relative salience of discourse entities in the hearer’s consciousness.” (Shimojo 2024: 8–9). Three types of saliences are distinguished: being in focus or focus of attention (givenness) corresponds to the *backward-looking center* in Centering Theory (Shimojo 2024: 9); with imposed salience, or *forward-looking salience*, “the speaker is directing the hearer with regard to how central an entity will be, or will continue to be, in the discourse” (Mulkern 2007: 120; Shimojo 2024: 10). Shimojo argues in favor of a third type of salience, which he calls *forward-looking non-salience* (*ibid.* 11), i.e. one in which a referent not previously salient (new), nevertheless becomes the center of attention in subsequent sentences. We will try to show that the concept of forward-looking (non-)salience is relevant in discussing reasons for the choice of some of the Breton syntactic templates.

4. Addressee-oriented salience and corpus observation

Therefore, in order to zero in on this concept of addressee-oriented focal, we need to turn to our corpus, with the following issues to be resolved:

- What are the contexts which favor these different syntactic templates?
- Is there a preferred word order pattern?
- What is exactly an “addressee-oriented focal”?

Our corpus is a translation (parallel) corpus and includes two novels and their translations: the second volume of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (English-Breton) and a classic novel by R. Hemon, *Mari Vorgan* (Breton-French).

4.1. Pattern I – S a V

- (10) [I] *Souezhus e voe efed ar gerioù-se war ar peurrest eus an tiegezh,*
surprising E was effect these words on the rest of the family
ma oa diaes da grediñ:
that was difficult to believe
‘The effect of this simple sentence on each member of the family was incredible.’

- [II] *Dudley a laoskas ur c’harvadenn damvouget hag a gouezhas diwar e gador*
Dudley A let.out a cry choking and A fell from his chair
en ur ober kement a cholori ken na grenas ar gegin gantañ;
while doing such racket so.that shook the kitchen because.of.it
‘Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen;’

- [III] *an itron Dursley a reas ur griadennig hag a stardas he daou zorn war e genoù;*
Mrs. Dursley A did a small.cry and A pressed her two hands on her mouth
‘Mrs Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth;’

- [IV] *evit an aotrou Dursley a savas en un taol-kont war e dreid,...*
as.for Mr. Dursley A rose in an instant on his feet...
‘Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, ...’

After saying that Harry's simple sentence had an impact on the characters, the speaker/narrator assumes that that creates an expectation in the hearer's mind to hear about each member of the family. The family members are well-known to the reader, of course, but what the latter expects to hear at this point in the discourse is what each of them did, because sentence [I] has created an information gap. This triggers pattern I for all the sentences [II, III, IV] in the discourse, with the Subject occupying the preverbal slot, but without any emphasis on the referents; it may be akin to a case of forward-looking non-salience, with the characters, who are already well-known to the reader, becoming the center of attention in all four sentences.

4.2. Pattern III – *V a ober* ('do')

The following sentence illustrates pattern III, with the auxiliary conjugation and the infinitive verb being promoted to the first slot, with the *A* particle again.

- (11) [I] *Evit Filomena, ne ouie na skrivañ na lenn.*
 as.for Filomena NEG knew neither write nor read.
 'As regards Filomena, she couldn't either read or write.'
- [II] *Pezh a ouie, avat, A oa kontañ istorioù.*
 thing a she.knew, however, a was tell stories
 'What she could do, however, was tell stories.'
- [III] *Kontañ istorioù a rae, bep tro ma ranke chom azezet,*
 tell stories A she.did each time that she.had.to stay seated
o tibluskañ legumaj pe o nezañ.
 peeling vegetables or sewing
 'So she told stories, each time she had to remain seated, peeling vegetables or sewing.'

The beginning of this discourse [sentence I] describes what the character Filomena could or could not do; she was illiterate, and the only thing she could do was tell stories. So at this point, the speaker (narrator) expects that the addressee (reader) will want to hear more about that ability of telling stories; so the whole verb phrase ("tell stories") occupies the first slot. It is not the entity that is salient here (Filomena), but the event; it seems to be a case of forward-looking salience of information: the speaker is directing the hearer's attention to the attendant circumstances of her telling stories (when she was peeling vegetables, etc.).

4.3. Pattern IV – *Oblique e V*

- (12) [I] *Ha te, ma faotr, emezañ da Harry, diwall na glevfen e vijes*
 And you my fellow, he.says to Harry, be.careful that I.could.hear E you.'d
bet o tirenkañ da voereb e-keit ma vo o naetaat an ti.
 be disturbing your aunt while that she.will.be cleaning the house
 "And you", 'he [Mr. Dursley] snarled at Harry, "you stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning."
- [II] *Dre an nor a-drek ec'h eas Harry e-maez an ti.*
 through the door back E went Harry out-of the house
 'Harry left through the back door.'
- [III] *Sklaer e oa an oabl, splann an heol.*
 clear E was the sky, bright the sun
 'It was a brilliant, sunny day.'

Sentence [I] sets the stage: Harry must leave the place. So, what the reader expects to read about next is where he went [II], so the preverbal constituent is the directional complement (“through the door”), which triggers the *E* particle and the finite verb. And once he is outside, what becomes salient in [III] is the weather: the predicate is fronted because that is the salient information at this point.

What is crucial for the selection of the appropriate syntactic template is the information gap created by the speaker/narrator in view of what s/he believes is the addressee/reader’s expectation; in that respect, examples (10, 11, 12) are straightforward. But in many cases, the choice of the template seems to be the speaker’s choice. Example (13) is a good illustration.

- (13) [i] *Harry, Ron ha Hermione, a deuas a-benn d’en em silañ e-barzh al levr di.*
 Harry Ron and Hermione *A* managed to slip into the bookshop.
 ‘Harry, Ron and Hermione squeezed inside.’
 [ii] *A-hed moger ar stal e oa ur pezh lostad tud,*
 along wall of.the shop *E* was a long queue of.people
 ‘A long queue wound right to the back of the shop,’
 [iii] *hag er pellañ edo Gilderoy Lockhart o sinañ e levrioù.*
 and at the end *E*.was Gilderoy Lockhart signing his books
 ‘where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books.’

In (13), in sentence [ii], the main information is objectively that there is a long queue of people waiting; the location where the action is taking place (the bookshop) is not salient at all, but it becomes the center of attention in sentence [II] with the choice of pattern IV (Oblique *E* V); this looks like Smimojo’s forward-looking non-salience. In fact, sentence [i] has raised expectations from the addressee that more needs to be said about the place, because the next center of attention in sentence [iii] is the location of the best-selling author G. Lockhart signing his book. In fact, the attention has shifted from what each of the familiar characters did ([i], to the bookshop where most of the action is going to happen from this point on. The concept of “addressee-oriented focal” starts to make sense: the focal is what the speaker/narrator believes the addressee/reader is expecting to hear about, but not what is objective new, focal information.

4.4. Cases of conventionalization.

Further careful analysis of the corpus has shown that there are cases of conventionalization for the choice of the template. We introduce two cases: very often, pattern II (D.O. *A* V) is used with light verb constructions (*give a smile, cast a look, take a bow*, as in 14i), and pattern IV (Oblique *E* V) whenever a specific manner is highlighted, as in (14ii).

- [The creature on the bed suddenly changed positions]
 (14) [i] *A-ruz e revr e tiskennas ar c’hrouadur eus ar gwele*
slipping on posterior *e* descended the creature from the bed
 ‘The creature slipped off the bed’
 [ii] *hag ur stouadenn ken izel a reas ma stokas ouzh an tapis*
 and a bow so low *A* he-did that he-hit on the carpet
gant beg e fri hir.
 with end of.his nose long
 ‘and bowed so low that the end of his nose touched the carpet.’

These cases deserve more attention; in the paragraph preceding sentence [i], the main referent (the little creature on Harry’s bed) has been introduced (*The little creature on the bed had large...*), so it is not discourse-new, hence the choice in [i] of fronting the manner in which it

got off the bed; the focus is the strange behavior of the creature, and not the description of the creature per se. That could also explain the choice of pattern II in sentence [ii], with the D.O. fronted, with the focus being on the curious behavior again (the bow) of the character. Space prevents us from developing these cases further.

5. Conclusion

This paper had two goals: showing the nature of grammatical relations in Breton, and the discourse-pragmatic motivation for the existence of several truth-conditionally equivalent syntactic templates. As regards grammatical relations, the subject has no special status in the choice of Breton sentences; neither its position nor its marking matters, but the choice of two pre-verbal particles account for the syntax of the sentences: particle *A* sets up a core relation between the verb and the constituent in the first slot, whereas particle *E* signals a non-core (oblique) relation; the first-slot element can semantically be anything - an Actor, an Undergoer, a Recipient (patterns I & 2), a time/place/manner Adjunct [pattern IV], or a verb in the infinitive (pattern III); therefore, the notions of Subject or Direct Object do not have special status. Not unlike Yimas, in Breton we see “[...] no evidence for a PSA such as subject in English or the *ang* phrase in Tagalog. Different constructions target different constituent types, and no one type emerges as privileged across the wide range of constructions” (Foley 2023: 874).

Our second objective was to explore the motivations for the syntactic templates: we have suggested that it is the pragmatic role of the first-slot referent that matters. Following the linguistic tradition in Breton, we have shown that the pre-verbal slot hosts an addressee-oriented focal, which has grammatical status; it is the element singled out for a special syntactic treatment (hence the templates), as well as a pragmatic status, as it is what constitute the salient piece of information in the clause. The concepts of forward-looking (non)salience (Shimojo 2024) have been tentatively applied to Breton, but they need to be refined. Breton thus appears as a language where grammatical relations are pragmatically-driven and dependent on the requirement of the first-slot focal. This, and the lack of nominal morphology, accounts for the impression that syntactic relations in Breton are constructed “online”, as it were: in the sentence *Pêr a zo melen e vlev*, (literally, ‘Peter is yellow his hair’), *Pêr* is a provisional subject until the addressee hears the final constituent “his hair” and is able to reconstruct the message ‘Peter has yellow hair’. This surprising feature has consequences in clause linkage marking (CLM): Breton has no dedicated relative pronoun, and a sentence such as (15) reads like two coordinated sentences with particle *A*.

(15) *Fred a oa o paouez peurlenn e roll-eñ hag a daolas ur sell ouzh lizher Harry.*

Fred *A* was finishing read.through his list and *A* cast a look list of.Harry

‘Fred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry’s.’

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