
When prosody ‘compensates for’ syntax: Modality-specific marking of contrastive subjects in French

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In written French, contrastive adverbs such as *par contre* (lit. ‘by contrast’) can occur in different syntactic positions depending on their scope: (i) clause-initially, to introduce a broad contrast, (ii) between the subject and the verb, to highlight the contrastive nature of the subject, or (iii) after the verb, to mark a transition between established and new information (Dupont 2021). In spoken French, *par contre* most often appears clause-initially, regardless of its scope (Brysbaert & Lahousse 2025). This paper studies whether prosody ‘compensates for’ the lack of syntactic marking of the adverb’s scope in speech, focusing on cases where *par contre* precedes a contrastive subject, i.e. a subject opposed to an explicit alternative (1).

- (1) Les châteaux bloquent souvent la vue sur l’horizon. Par contre, les moulins créent un beau décor.
‘Castles often block the view of the horizon. However, windmills create a beautiful landscape.’

We combine a corpus analysis with a controlled production experiment. First, 51 instances of clause-initial *par contre* were extracted from four spoken corpora (VALIBEL, CFPP, OFROM, CRFP). Each was annotated for the presence of a contrastive subject and for the strength of the prosodic boundary following it, based on three prosodic cues: (i) presence or absence of a silent pause, (ii) pitch height on the final syllable of the subject compared to that of the adverb, and (iii) relative lengthening of the final syllable of the subject compared to that of the adverb. For the production experiment, native speakers of French were asked to produce sentences in contexts triggering a contrastive interpretation of the subject (cf. *les moulins* ‘windmills’ vs. *les châteaux* ‘castles’ in (1)) and in contexts that do not trigger a contrastive interpretation of the subject.

The corpus data show that when the subject is contrastive, a strong prosodic boundary can follow it, thereby marking the scope of *par contre*. Although not systematic, this suggests a flexible marking strategy typical of spontaneous speech, the robustness of which is being tested in the ongoing experiment. Overall, the findings highlight a reconfiguration of information-encoding means depending on modality: whereas writing mobilizes syntax, speech relies on prosodic structuring.

References: • Brysbaert, J. & K. Lahousse (2025). Syntactic position of contrast markers in different registers of French. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 30(1), 1–23.
• Dupont, M. (2021). *Conjunctive markers of contrast in English and French: From syntax to lexis and discourse*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain.