
Base ellipsis in coordinative constructions: the case of *pré et post-X* in French

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1 Introduction¹

Coordination is a syntactic phenomenon where two or more elements, sharing the same syntactic category, are juxtaposed (Goodall 2017). The conjuncts (i.e. juxtaposed elements) are free morphemes or phrases, whereas bound morphemes such as prefixes cannot be conjuncts by themselves.

However, in French, we can observe the cases where two prefixes are apparently linked by the conjunctions *et* ‘and’ or *ou* ‘or’,² such as example (1)³:

- (1) *les garderies pré et post-scolaires*
ART.PL nursery.PL pre and post-scholastic.PL
‘before and after-school childcare’

How can we account for the morphosyntactic status of the first prefix (i.e. *pré*)? Is it really possible that two bound morphemes are directly conjoined?

Indeed, certain prefixes can appear as morphologically independent elements, but this is not the case for the French prefix *pré*. In fact, in the case of simple affixation, the attachment to a base lexeme is necessary for this prefix (cf. 2a), and the base ellipsis is not possible (2b):

- (2) a. *la préinscription est gratuite.*
ART.F.SG pre-registration.F.SG be-3SG free.F.SG
‘the pre-registration is free’
b. **la pré est gratuite.*

From these facts, we can suppose that the prefix *pré* does not have the status of an autonomous lexical item, and that the ellipsis of the base is exceptionally possible for coordinative constructions where the two prefixes share the same base. We will call the units such as *pré et post-scolaires* (cf. 1) “*pré et post-X* constructions”. However, this does not imply that the constructions do not accept other pairings of prefixes.

In this study, we will focus on constructions where the first prefix is *pré*. Firstly, we will examine the difference between lexicalized prefixes and the prefix *pré* in the *pré et post-X* constructions. Secondly, we will analyze the frequency and the possibility of combinations of prefixes (*pré* and other prefixes) by means of the frTenTen20 corpus, which consists of 20.9 billion words collected from the web. Based on the result of the corpus analysis, we will argue that the base ellipsis is not a simple morphological process but a process to be realized within syntactic operations.

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² Other conjunctions, such as *ni* ‘nor’ can also be used, but far less frequently than *et* and *ou*. In this research, we will focus on the cases with *et* and *ou*.

³ All examples from (1) to (7) are from the texts registered in frTenTen20 corpus.

2 *Pré*: non-autonomy and non-lexicalization

There are two kinds of prefixes in French, namely, autonomous (or separable) prefixes and bound prefixes (Lehmann and Martin-Berthet 1998: 148). The former can function not only as a prefix, but also as a preposition or an adverb. For example, *après* in *après-guerre* ‘postwar’ is a prefix attached to the base *guerre* ‘war’, whereas in *après la guerre* ‘after the war’, it is a preposition (Amiot 2005: 183-184). On the other hand, bound prefixes cannot be morphologically autonomous elements (cf. 2b). Both *pré* and *post* are bound prefixes.

Certain bound prefixes can appear alone as an ellipped form of a complex lexical unit. In this case, it is possible that the prefix is lexicalized, containing semantic information that the base originally had.

For example, the prefix *ex* can appear alone if the ellipped base denotes a romantic or spousal partner (e.g. *mon ex-copain* ‘my former boyfriend; *mon ex-femme* ‘my former wife’). In contrast, *mon ex-conseiller* ‘my former counselor’ cannot be transformed into *mon ex*. This restriction suggests that the autonomous *ex* already contains the meaning of its ellipped base (i.e. that of *copain*, *femme*, etc.). In effect, we can observe the speech such as *vous pensez à votre ex ?* ‘do you think of your former (boyfriend, husband, etc.)?’ without specifying which is the base lexeme exactly. Given these facts, we can consider that the autonomous *ex* is lexicalized, having a meaning “former romantic or spousal partner”.⁴

On the other hand, *pré* in the *pré et post-X* construction is not a lexicalized prefix because, unlike the autonomous *ex*, the indication of the base is always necessary. It is always the first apparition of the base (i.e. *X* of *pré-X*) that can be ellipped (cf. 3a), and not vice versa (cf. 3b):

- (3) a. *les pré et post-événements*
ART.M.PL pre and post-events.M.PL
‘pre(-event) and post-event celebrations’
b. **les pré-événements et post*

The base of the *pré et post-X* construction is a noun (cf. 3a) or a relational adjective (i.e. an adjective having a classificatory function in relation to the head). It is often the case that a nominal lexeme is applied without suffixation, instead of the corresponding adjective that is formally absent (cf. 4):⁵

- (4) *en période pré et post Covid-19.*
in period.F.SG pre and post Covid-19.SG
‘in before and after-Covid-19 period’

It is the coordinative construction that supports the functional compatibility of the conjuncts. Since the prefix *pré* is not lexicalized, the conjoined elements are therefore *pré-X* and *post-X*. In other words, without the support of coordinative construction, the ellipsis of the base of *pré-X* becomes impossible (e.g. **en période pré*; cf. *en période pré Covid-19*).

⁴ Similar phenomena can be observed for clipped lexemes. According to Kerleroux (1999:97-102), *colo* (the clipped form of *colonie* ‘colony’), signifies only *colonie de vacances* ‘summer camp’.

⁵ As is the case in (4), the hyphen between *post* and the base can be replaced by a space. In some cases, there is no hyphen or space between the two (e.g. *la période pré et postélectorale* ‘before and after the election period’).

3 Base ellipsis: a process activated within syntactic operations

We can observe 5,488 occurrences of “*pré et*” sequences and 1,055 occurrences of “*pré ou*” sequences in the frTenTen20 corpus. As Table 1 indicates, the most frequent element co-occurring with *pré* is the prefix *post*, with 4,927 occurrences of *pré et post-X* and 851 occurrences of *pré ou post-X*:

Table 1: Co-occurrence of “*pré et/ou*” (frTenTen20 corpus)

(a) “ <i>pré et</i> ”		(b) “ <i>pré ou</i> ”	
Sequence	Occurrence	Sequence	Occurrence
1 <i>pré et</i> POST	4,927	1 <i>pré ou</i> POST	851
2 <i>pré et</i> PRO	155	2 <i>pré ou</i> PROTO	46
3 <i>pré et</i> PROTO	148	3 <i>pré ou</i> PÉRI	33
4 <i>pré et</i> PARA	79	4 <i>pré ou</i> PER	21
5 <i>pré et</i> PÉRI	66	5 <i>pré ou</i> RÉTRO	20
6 <i>pré et</i> PER	45	6 <i>pré ou</i> PRO	18
7 <i>pré et</i> INTRA	17	7 <i>pré ou</i> PARA	8
8 <i>pré et</i> RÉTRO	10	8 <i>pré ou</i> NÉO	8
9 <i>pré et</i> EXTRA	9	9 <i>pré ou</i> EXTRA	6
others	32	others	44
TOTAL	5,488	TOTAL	1,055

The high frequency of *pré et/ou post-X* can be described in terms of the semantic compatibility of the two prefixes, anteriority and posteriority, respectively. In addition to this, there are also some occurrences of *pré et/ou après-X*, where the autonomous prefix *après* ‘after’ indicates posteriority.

The base lexeme is varied in general, but in some sequences, the pairing of prefixes and their bases is almost fixed. For example, in the sequence of *pré et/ou proto-X*, the item coming after is, 89.2% of the time, *histoire* ‘history’ or lexemes derived from this noun (*historique* ‘historic’, *historien* ‘historian’, etc.).

In many cases, the coordination occurs within the word level, such as with the relational adjectives *pré-natal* and *post-natal* in (5):

(5) *un atelier sur le yoga pré et post-natal*
 ART.M.SG workshop.M.SG on ART.M.SG yoga.M.SG pre and postnatal.M.SG
 ‘a workshop on pre(natal) and postnatal yoga’

However, in the corpus, there are around 200 cases (approximately 3% of the total occurrences) containing other (especially, functional) elements such as prepositions and articles. In (6), two prepositional phrases modifying the head *responsable* are conjoined. The coordination therefore occurs on a syntactic level:

(6) *Responsable de la pré et de la postproduction*
 responsible.M.SG of ART.F.SG pre and of ART.F.SG post-production.F.SG
 ‘person responsible for pre(production) and postproduction’

The example in (6) demonstrates that the ellipsis of the base of *pré* is not a simple morphological process, but a process activated within syntactic operations.⁶ In addition, *pré et post-X* construction is not a completely fixed unit. The process of coordination embedded in this construction accepts syntactic units such as prepositional phrases. In this sense, this construction is different from fixed *X-et-Y* sequences such as *Lot-et-Garonne* (the name of a department in France, consisting of the names of two rivers).

Furthermore, the elements conjoined with *pré-X* may not only be prefixed elements but also elements with a modifier of a noun (cf. 7):

- (7) a. *commentaires de pré et début de match*
 comments.M.PL of pre and beginning.M.SG of match.M.SG
 ‘comments of before and the beginning of match’
- b. *aux pré et jeunes adolescents*
 to.ART.PL pre and young.M.PL adolescents.M.PL
 ‘to pre(adolescents) and young adolescents’

In the examples (7a) and (7b), the categorical difference between the (bound) prefixes and the modifier of noun is neutralized. Since the functions of prefixes and modifiers are identical (i.e. to modify the base or head), they can be conjoined together in *pré et post-X* construction.

4 Conclusion

The base ellipsis in *pré-X* is a process that is not available alone. This process needs to be activated within *pré et post-X* construction. From the observation of the corpus, it is evident that the pairings of the conjuncts are not limited to a specific prefix but are open to other types of modifiers. This fact shows that a process of prefixation and a syntactic process may coexist in the same construction.

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⁶ The postlexical feature of the ellipsis can also be accounted for from a phonological point of view. Meinschaefer (2023) reports that the possibility of ellipsis in coordination may depend on the number of syllables that the base lexeme has.