

Unit 56 - Creating emphasis

1 Definitions

When we speak or write we often wish to place emphasis on a particular element in a sentence. In English this is most commonly achieved by means of vocal stress in spoken language, rendered in written language by boldface, italics or underlining. For example :

You go, if you want to. **I've** been there already
She wanted to see **me**

In French, however, word stress is much less common. Instead emphasis is generally created by two other means :

- by means of a change in the usual word order and often the addition of a personal pronoun. This is sometimes called **dislocation** and is used to emphasize nouns and pronouns :
Vas-y, **toi**, si tu veux. **Moi**, j'y suis déjà allé

- by means of an introducing construction such as *c'est ... que*. This is sometimes called **extraction** and is used to emphasize nouns, pronouns and adverbials of all kinds :
C'est moi qu'elle voulait voir

2 Stressing nouns and pronouns using dislocation

2.1 Subjects

2.1.1 Subject nouns

Most commonly the noun is moved to the beginning or end of the sentence, whilst a subject pronoun (*il, elle*) is put in its place :

My brother wouldn't have said that
Mon frère, il n'aurait pas dit ça
Il n'aurait pas dit ça, mon frère

2.1.2 Subject pronouns

Here the basic sentence stays the same while a stressed pronoun (*moi, toi*) is placed at the beginning or end of the sentence :

I wouldn't have said that
Moi, je n'aurais pas dit ça
Je n'aurais pas dit ça, **moi**

2.2 Direct objects

2.2.1 Direct object nouns

Here the noun is moved to the beginning or end of the sentence, whilst an object pronoun (*le, la, les*) is put in its place :

I didn't like his latest film
Son dernier film, je ne l'ai pas aimé,

2.2.2 Direct object pronouns

Here the basic sentence stays the same while a stressed pronoun is placed at the beginning or end of the sentence :

I respect **you**
Toi, je te respecte / **Je te** respecte, **toi**

2.3 Indirect objects / other complements

2.3.1 Nouns

Here the noun is moved to the beginning of the sentence, whilst an object pronoun (*lui, leur, en*) is included in the original sentence :

He told **his parents**

Ses parents, il le leur a dit

I'm not afraid of **dentists**

Les dentistes, je n'en ai pas peur

2.3.2 Pronouns

Here the basic sentence stays the same while a stressed pronoun is placed at the beginning of the sentence :

He told **them**

Eux, il le leur a dit

I'm not afraid of **them**

Eux, je n'en ai pas peur

Note that dislocation is a very common feature of questions in spoken French, whether or not there is anything being overtly stressed :

Ils sont bien arrivés à Paris, **tes parents** ?

Did your parents arrive in Paris safely ?

Tu l'a vu, **le dernier film de Depardieu** ?

Have you seen Gérard Depardieu's latest film ?

Note also that nouns and infinitive phrases can also be emphasized using *ce* or *ça* on a similar structure :

La politique, **ça** m'intéresse beaucoup

I'm very interested in politics

Passer quelques jours en France, j'aimerais bien **ça**

I'd love to spend a few days in France

L'essentiel, **c'est** d'arriver à l'heure

The main thing is to arrive on time

3 Stressing nouns and pronouns using extraction

3.1 For emphasizing subject nouns and pronouns, the construction *c'est ... qui* is used :

Mon frère / Il a dit ça

⇒ **C'est** mon frère / lui **qui** a dit ça

My brother / He said that

3.2 For emphasizing direct object nouns and pronouns, the construction *c'est ... que* is used :

Je voulais voir ton frère

⇒ **C'est** ton frère / toi **que** je voulais voir

I wanted to see your brother / you

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- 3.3** For emphasizing nouns and pronouns introduced by a preposition, the construction *c'est ... que* is used :

Je voulais te parler / parler à ton frère
⇒ **C'est** à ton frère / à toi **que** je voulais parler
*I wanted to speak to **your brother** / to **you***

- 3.4** Nouns and clauses can also be emphasized using the structure *ce qui / ce que ... c'est* (see 29:5.1.2)

4 Stressing possessives

In spoken French it is acceptable to stress the individual word vocally, especially with *mon, ma, mes* :

It's **my** book, not **yours** !
*C'est **mon** livre, non **le tien** !*

In written French and much spoken French emphasis is provided by adding *à* plus the appropriate emphatic pronoun (*moi, toi, lui* etc.) :

No, that's **your** opinion
*Non, c'est **ton** avis **à toi***

5 Stressing demonstratives

These are stressed by adding *-ci* or *-là* to the end of the noun or demonstrative :

We entered by **this** door and not by **that** one
*C'est par **cette** porte-**ci** et non **celle-là** qu'on est entrés*

6 Stressing adverbial phrases

- 6.1** As in English, these can be emphasized by means of vocal stress :

I'd like to speak to you **alone**
*Je voudrais te parler **seul***

- 6.2** More commonly, however, they are emphasized by means of extraction, using the framing construction *c'est ... que* :

*We first met **at a party** / It was **at a party** that we first met*
*C'est **à une soirée** que nous nous sommes rencontrés pour la première fois*
*Its **thanks to him** that the package was found*
*C'est **grâce à lui** que le paquet a été retrouvé*

7 Stressing verbs

- 7.1** In many instances verbs in French can be emphasized by vocal stress :

I **love** chocolate ! I **hate** soap operas !
*J'**adore** le chocolat ! Je **hais** les feuilletons !*

- 7.2** One of the most common forms of verb stress in English arises when a question is being asked in order to make sure of something. In French, emphasis is created by adding *bien* after the verb (in simple tense) or auxiliary (in compound tenses) :

That **is** a Wednesday, isn't it ?
*C'est **bien** un mercredi, n'est-ce pas ?*

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You **did** remember to close the window, didn't you ?

*Tu a **bien** pensé à fermer la fenêtre, n'est-ce pas ?*

You **are** coming to the party on Saturday ?

*Tu viens **bien** à la soirée samedi ?*

This structure also works for certain exclamative questions :

I've lost my glasses. Where **can** they be ?

*J'ai perdu mes lunettes. Où peuvent-elles **bien** être ?*

- 7.3** English also uses verb stress when picking up on an element (usually a noun or pronoun) recently mentioned. This is rendered in French by dislocation of this element :

I **saw** Pierre this afternoon in town

*Je l'ai vu, **Pierre**, cet après-midi en ville*

***Pierre**, je l'ai vu cet après-midi en ville*

8 Emphasising two elements

Sometimes we wish to place emphasis on two elements in a sentence. This can be achieved through double dislocation (in informal French) :

Marie hates **football** - ***Marie le football** elle déteste **ça***

Or through a combination of dislocation and extraction :

If anything it was **Fido** who chose **us**

*On dirait plutôt que c'était **Fido** qui nous a choisi, nous*

What worries **me** is **his attitude**

*Ce qui **m'inquiète**, **moi**, c'est **son attitude***