UMR 7320 workshop in honour of Hans Obenauer, October 20th 2023.

On French Que, Quoi, Ce que and clefts.
Jean-Yves Pollock, professeur émérite Paris Est Marne-la-vallée

1. The riddle.

(1) a. Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’il a dit?
   b. Qu’est-ce que c’est ?

(2) a *C’est pourquoi qu’il est parti?
   b ??C’est comment qu’il a payé?

(3) a. *Pourquoi est-ce que c’est qu’il est parti?
   b. ??Comment est-ce que c’est qu’il a payé?

(4) a. Qu’est-ce que c’était (qu’il a dit)?
   b.* Qu’était-ce que c’était (qu’il a dit)?

(5) a. C’est *que vs. quoi qu’il a dit ?
   b. C’est *que vs. quoi?
   c. *Quoi est-ce que c’est qu’il a dit ?
   d. *Quoi est-ce que c’est ?

Fact 1: (1a) is a cleft (cf. Obenauer (1981)). Clitic que, unlike quoi, cannot stand in the focus position of (5a) or (5b). We would therefore expect (1a, b) to be as bad as (5a, b). Yet they’re perfect, unlike the expected but unacceptable (5c, d). Why is that so?

2. On Qu’est-ce que questions (Poletto & Pollock (2021), Pollock (2021), (2022))

(6) Ce que tu as fait est surprenant
(7) Qu’est-ce que tu as fait ?
(8) Ce que tu as fait c’est quoi?
(9) Cusa t’è fai cusè?

Claim 1: Ce que tu as fait in (7), despite the misleading spelling est-ce, is the same free relatives as in (6). In such constructions ce is merged to the left of the raised null antecedent to license/identify it (Pollock (2023)), as sketched in (10a):

(10) a. [est [sc [ce CHOSE_i [que [tu as fait t]]] que]]
   b. [ Que] [est [sc [ce CHOSE_i [que [tu as fait t]]] t]]
   c. [sp Que] [ε [sc [ce CHOSE_i [que [tu as fait t]]] t]]

In that structure the free relative is the subject of a small clause embedded under est whose predicate is the interrogative clitic que. As a clitic que adjoins/cliticises to est as in (10b)

Claim 2: Est in such questions, despite its spelling, is the tense-less root of the copula ε (cf. (4b)), so (10c) is (the last but one step in) the derivation of (7) (cf. Pollock (2021), (2022), (2023)).
Claim 3: *Qui est-ce que tu as vu?*, *Où est-ce que tu pars?*, *Quand est-ce que tu vas à Paris?* may be analysed along the same lines:

(11) a. \[Qui, [e [ce QUI, [que [tu as vu t.|]]] t.|] \]
b. \[Où, [e [ce OU, [que [tu pars t.|]]] t.|] \]
c. \[Quand, [e [ce OU, [que [tu pars t.|]]] t.|] \]

Claim 4: in (11) the interrogative predicates *qui, où* and *quand* delete –i.e. permit the non lexicalisation of– their relative counterparts in the headless relative. In that perspective *ce* is merged for identifying QUI, OU and QUAND and (11a, b, c) can again be seen in the same light as sentences like *Qui tu as vu, c’est qui?*, *Où tu vas, c’est où?*, *Quand tu pars, c’est quand?* etc.

⇒ The analysis of the clitic vs. non clitic contrast between *que* vs. *qui, où, quand, combien* etc. in the pair (12a) vs. (12b), parallel to (12c) vs. (12d), shows (10)-(11) should be enriched.

(12) a. *Que, à ton avis, est-ce qu’elle veut?
   b. Où, à ton avis, est-ce qu’elle a vu cela ?
   c. *Que, à ton avis, veut-elle?
   d. Où, à ton avis, a-t-elle vu cela?
   e. Qu’est-ce qu’elle veut?
   f. Que veut-elle? ‘What wants she?’ What does she want?

⇒ Parentheticals like *à ton avis* in such examples are merged in the high left periphery, as claimed in Munaro & Obenauer (2002). (12b) and (12d) show that non clitic *ou, (also quand, pourquoi, comment etc.), cross over à ton avis on their way to the interrogative slot further up in the HLP. (12a, c) show that clitic *que* cannot ‘skip’ such parentheticals, In that respect *que* is like pronominal clitics: *Il, à mon avis, est malin vs. Lui, à mon avis, est malin.*

⇒ This is because as a clitic it must first adjoin to veut in (12f) or to e in (12e) then move as a head to IntP, which is only possible if no blocking element intervenes between it and its final target as illustrated by (13a), minimally contrasting with (13b) –Cf. Poletto & Pollock (2004):

(13) a. \[IntP Que, ([*à ton avis] [cp t.| e [[cp ce t.|, que [ip elle veut t.|]]] t.|] \]
b. \[IntP Où, ([à ton avis] [e [t.|, [cp ce OU, que [ip elle a vu cela t.|]]] t.|] \]

⇒ Questions such as (14) share the tense-less root e with (10)-(11), but cannot be analysed as (10)-(11) are: neither *ce qu’il a lu/voté* nor *ce que tu as parlé* are semantically appropriate free relatives. *Quel livre, à quel linguiste, contre qui* are clearly arguments of lu, parlé, voté.

(14) a. Quel livre est-ce qu’il a lu?
   b. A quel linguiste est-ce que tu as parlé ?
   c. Contre qui est-ce qu’il a voté?

Claim 5. (14) are to be paired with the questions in (15) and derived as shown in (16):

(15) a. Quel livre qu’il a lu?
   b. A quel linguiste qu’t’as parlé ?
   c. Contre qui qu’il a voté?
3.

Claim 6: ε is incapable of licensing the traces in (17) unlike tensed and infinitival être and the matrix predicates in (18). Merger of ce in (16)-(17) is required by the language particular use of ε in Qu-est-ce que questions. Using demonstrative ce for that purpose in that very specific French configuration however takes advantage of a general property of demonstratives at work in headless relatives in a number of languages and dialects, including (literary) English in sentences like That which you feared has come to pass and French subordinate sentences like Pierre se moque de ce que ses étudiants ne l’aiment pas or Je tiens à ce que tu partes (Cf. Wiltschko (1998), Pollock (2023)).

3. On the pre-que position.

Fact 2: Along with qui, où, quand, comment, pourquoi in (19a...e) colloquial French also allows for bare quoi to stand in the pre-que position of (15), as illustrated in (19f...l):¹

¹ (19f, g, h) are quoted in Lefeuvre (2006, p. 91, 99, 121). (19f, g, h) are from Vincenot’s Le pape des escargots. The other examples are from Maurice Genevois’s Nuit de Guerre, the second chapter of his Ceux de 14 (Omnibus edition, Villeneuve-d’Ascq, 2012). Example (19i) is from page 299, (19j, k) from page 311, and (19l) from page 285. Maurice Genevois’s Ceux de 14 is an eye-witness account of the early months of the First World War, known for the remarkable vividness and accuracy of its description of life in the trenches. These examples thus certainly record Genevois’s soldiers’ speech 110 years ago very faithfully and they still strike me as fine in that colloquial register of French. Similar examples can be found in the other chapters of Ceux de 14. Such questions are frequent in the Romance domain, in particular in the NIDs and in colloquial Italian.
(19) a. Qui qu’t’as vu aujourd’hui?
b. Où qu’e’va ?
c. Quand qu’tu pars ?
d. Comment qu’tu vas?
e. Pourquoi qu’elle est partie?
f. Quoi donc qu’elle avait?
g. Quoi donc qui t’arrive?
h. Quoi qu’il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
i. Quoi qu’on fout tout l’long du jour ?
j. Quoi qu’c’est?
k. Quoi qu’on y peut ?
l. Quoi qu’tu m’regardes?

**Fact 3.** Such examples contrast with the unacceptable (20):²

(20) a. *Quoi est-ce qu’il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
b. *Quoi est-ce que c’est ?
c. *Quoi est-ce qu’on y peut ?
d. *Quoi est-ce que tu me regardes ?

**Claim 7.** (20) should be seen in the same light as (21) in Standard French:³

(21) a. *Quoi tu fais?
b. *Quoi fais-tu?
c. *Je ne sais pas quoi il fait

Only those Qu-words and phrases which can occur at the left edge of SCLI questions such as *Où est-il?* in standard French can also occur in the Interrogative layer of *Qu’est-ce que* questions. Bare *Quoi* in standard French surfaces at the right-edge of questions such as (22):

(22) Tu fais quoi?

² Their absence in Genevois’s book cannot prove that they were unacceptable 110 years ago but it at least suggests that Genevois didn’t hear them.

³ Lefeuvre (2006, p. 50-51, 57) quotes examples *Quoi donc t’étonne ? Quoi donc m’opresse et me ravit à la fois, Quoi d’autre pourrait m’amener chez toi à cette heure ?* from Grevisse (1988), Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and Willy et Colette’s Claudine à Paris. My claim is that such examples are derived from colloquial *Quoi donc qui t’étonne ? Quoi donc qui m’opresse et me ravit à la fois, Quoi d’autre qui pourrait …by qui deletion,* which results in a more ‘standard’ style. Why adding d’autre (else) or diable (hell/devil) to bare quoi in such examples improves things for some speakers is not really understood. In my French the same addition in (20) or (21) does not, as shown in (i) and (ii):

(i) a. *Quoi diable est-ce qu’il a fait, le terrible Kundam?
b. *Quoi d’autre est-ce que c’est ?
c. *Quoi diable est-ce qu’on y peut ?

(ii) a. *Quoi diable est-ce que tu me regardes ?
b. *Quoi diable tu fais?
c. *Quoi d’autre fais-tu?
d. *Je ne sais pas quoi diable il fait
Claim 8. (22) and the like are derived by leftward movement to the focus position of the French version of Belletti’s (2005) low left periphery. In short bare quoi bears a [+focus] feature to be checked in the LLP. Subsequent remnant movement of vP to the LLP Top/GroundP slot yields the word order of (22) and its interrogative interpretation. Quoi here is not in situ, despite appearances, as argued in Poletto & Pollock (2021)).

Claim 9. The pre-que position in the HLP of colloquial examples like (19) is the counterpart in the HLP of Belletti’s LLP focus layer: Both attract qu-phrases including quoi and check a focus feature. For bare quoi to be licit in (21) it would have to be able to share with qui, où, etc. the ability to move to the interrogative/relative layer of the HLP. It can’t so neither (20) nor (21) are generated.

Fact 4. Qui, où, quand etc. also head free relatives in addition to their role in questions, as shown by examples (23) and (24):

(23) a. Où tu iras?
   b. Quand tu partiras?
   c. Qui tu embrasseras?
   d. Combien ça coutera?
   e. Combien t’en mangeras?
   f. Comment tu vas?
(24) a. J’irai où tu iras
   b. Je partirai quand tu partiras
   c. J’embrasserai qui tu embrasseras
   d. Ça coutera combien ça coutera
   e. J’en mangerai combien tu en mangeras
   f. Je ferai comment tu fais

Fact 5. The only two qu-words that cannot occur in (23), quoi and que, also fail to head free relatives in Standard French.

(25) a. (Je ne sais pas) *Que tu fais?
    b. (Je ne sais pas) *Quoi tu fais?
    c. *Je ferai que tu fais
    d. *Je ferai quoi tu fais

Fact 6. But quoi+que in colloquial questions does have a free relative counterpart: 4

(26) a. Je mangerai quoi qu’tu manges
    b. Je lirai quoi qu’tu liras
    c. Tout le monde pourrait dire quoi qu’il veut là-dessus

(27) a. Quoi qu’on lise, on ne peut pas tout savoir
   ‘Whatever you read you can’t know everything’ = Whatever you read you ...

---

4 I heard (26c) on May 15th 2023 during the 8 AM news program of France Culture. It was uttered by a doctor who was being interviewed on the requirement that all doctors and nurses working in hospitals be vaccinated against the covid virus.
b. Quoi qu’on fasse, one ne peut satisfaire tout le monde.
‘What that one do subjunctive one can’t please everybody’ = Whatever you do you ...

4. Solving the riddle.

(28) Qu’est-ce que c’est?
(29) C’est quoi?

(28) should be seen in the same light as (30) and (29) in that of (31):

(30) a. Qui est-ce que c’est?
b. Où est-ce que c’est ?
c. Quand est-ce que c’est?
(31) a. C’est qui?
b. C’est où?
c. C’est quand?

The derivations in (32) yield (30), but the very same in (33) for (28) should crash since it involves the two illicit steps in (34):

(32) a. [IntP Qui i [εP ce [FocP ti [que [TP ce est t_i]]]]]
b. [IntP Où i [εP ce [FocP ti [que [TP c’est t_i]]]]]
c. [IntP Quand i [εP ce [FocP ti [que [TP c’est t_i]]]]]

(33) [IntP Que j [εP t_i [ce [FocP QUE CHOSEi [que [ce est t_i]]]]]]

(34) a. *C’est que?
b. *Que que c’est?

The more complex derivation in (34c) –see section 2 above— does not:

(34) c. [IntP Que j [εP t_i [ce [FocP CHOSEi [que [ce est t_i]]]]]]

In (34c) que adjoins to εP and ‘hops’ to IntP so it never finds itself in a focus position. However non lexical CHOSE does.5 Since non lexical entities, clitics in general and que in particular cannot bear a focus feature, CHOSE cannot be merged in or move to the focus positions of the copular clause in (34a, b). Therefore (34c) cannot be the parse of (28) either.

The correct derivation for (28) involves (19j) –from Genevois’s book–, as shown in (35):

(19j) Quoi qu’c’est?

(35) a. [[FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est t_i]]]]
b. [εP [FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est t_i]]] que]

5 Unlike the null antecedent of relatives like J’aime ce que tu fais. The object position of fais is not an inherent focus position, as shown by questions like Que fais-tu? (what are you doing?) or simple affirmative sentences like Il le fait. Clitic que, just like clitic le, can be merged as the object of fais but neither can be merged in the post est/était position in *Ca l’est/était vs. C’est/était lui *Ca ne l’est pas vs. Ca n’est pas lui. Il fait quoi? is a fine standard question because quoi moves to the LLP focus position, à la Belletti. Lexical quoi can be merged in a non focus position provided it checks its focus feature at a later stage of the derivation, as in the colloquial examples in (19) or (26). On quoi moving from a focus position to a non focus position see 5 below.
On the assumption that such sentences can also be headless relatives\(^6\) they qualify as the first step in the derivation in (35), where the post est position and the pre que positions are both focus positions filled by lexical quoi. Merging the small clause and its que predicate yields (35b). For this derivation to converge que must ‘void’ – i.e. suppress the lexicalisation of quoi, which yields (35c) upon merging of ce. Non lexical QUOI is thus ‘licensed/identified’. Finally, movement of que to εP and IntP yields (35d) which obeys the constraints on elements in focus positions. So (35) is the only licit derivation for (28). The derivation of Qui est-ce que c’est? is simpler:

(36)  
   a. \([_{\text{FocP}} \text{Qui}] \text{[que [}_{TP} \text{c’est t]}]\])  
   b. \([_{\text{IntP}} \text{Qui}] \text{[ε [}_{FocP} \text{ce [que [}_{TP} \text{c’est t]}]]}\])

Three important remarks must be made at this point:

\(\Rightarrow\) Firstly, (35) and (36) take it for granted that the requirement that the pre-que Focus position should be filled by some [+focus] lexical qui-item need only be met derivationally. This is uncontroversially true of interrogative clefts in many languages, including English: in Who was it that you were talking to? it is the non lexical ghost (trace) of who that is sitting in the focus position of the cleft. In (35) quoi despite the fact that it is voided at a later stage can be reconstructed in that focus position too because ce licenses/identifies its ghost.

\(\Rightarrow\) Secondly, the derivation in (35) has que deleting quoi. But deletion of that sort is universally held to be restricted to strictly identical lexical items, which que and quoi are not. Despite this, I argue that que and quoi are close enough to allow for deletion under identity of quoi by que. More particularly, they should be seen in the light of the Wh-doubling configurations of many Northern Italian Dialects. Consider for example (37) in Illasi (Verona):

(37)  
S’alo fat che? ‘What has-he done what?’ What did did he do?

\(\Rightarrow\) In such configurations clitics s(a) and the strong forms che co-occur in the same interrogative sentence and are merged as a single complex wh- word [Che, sa]. Sa, just like que in French and unlike illasi che and French quoi, has all the defining properties of a clitic: as Poletto & Pollock (2004, 245) show sa cannot be separated from the finite verb by phrases like second ti (= according to you), cannot be used in isolation, cannot be the objects of prepositions, cannot be coordinated or modified. The doubling in (37) is restricted to a limited subset of wh-items (the counterparts of) ‘what’, ‘who’, where’, and ‘how’. Cecilia has further noted that doubling of this sort first arises in the NIDs with the counterparts of quoi and que.

\(\Rightarrow\) No evidence has been provided that quoi and que should be merged as a complex lexical item. Still, I claim they are sufficiently close – Que being the weak form of quoi or in Bouchard & Hirschbühler’s (1986) terminology the clitic allomorph of quoi – to allow for the deletion of quoi by que in (35).

\(\Rightarrow\) Thirdly ε, the tense-less root of the copula, is incapable of licensing traces, unlike tensed and infinitival être and matrix predicates. So French resorts to merging demonstrative ce in such derivations, as required by French using ε in Qu’est-ce que questions. But recourse to ce for

---

\(^6\) A free relative like Je mangerai quoi que c’est dans la casserole (‘I’ll eat what that this is in the pan’ = I’ll eat what there is in the pan) strikes me as plausible in that style of French.
that purpose capitalises on a general property of demonstratives (cf. Wiltschko (1998), Pollock (2023)). Assuming all this is on the right track, we now go back to the original riddle:

(38) Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’il a dit?
(39) a. Où est-ce que c’est qu’il va?
   b. Quand est-ce que c’est qu’il prend ses vacances?
   c. Qui est-ce que c’est qu’il a vu ?

⇒ The analysis offered for solving the Qu’est-ce que c’est? puzzle carries over to (38) straightforwardly. Its derivation in (40) only differs from (35) in its first step, which would yield the fine ‘in situ’ interrogative cleft C’est quoi qu’il a dit? if nothing further happened.

(40) a. [TP c’est [FocP quoi, [qu’il a dit t1]]]
   b. [FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est [FocP qui, [qu’il a dit t1]]]]]
   c. [SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est [FocP qui, [qu’il a dit t1]]]] que]]
   d. [SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est [FocP qui, [qu’il a dit t1]]]] que]]
   e. [IntP Quej [F t1 ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est [FocP qui, [qu’il a dit t1]]]]]]]

At step b quoi moves to the pre-que focus position, which as such yields the fine colloquial interrogative cleft Quoi que c’est qu’il a dit? At step c the whole cleft is merged as the subject of the small clause whose predicate is clitic que. As above que voids quoi at step d, triggering merger of ce for licensing/identifying purposes, and the final step has ε and IntP merged yielding (40e), the correct parse for (38). The sentences in (39) are derived more economically, as (41) shows:

(41) a. [TP c’est qui, [qu’il a vu t1]]
   b. [FocP qui, [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il a vu t1]]]]
   c. [IntP Quij [F t1 ce [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il a vu t1]]]]]
   d. [TP c’est où, [qu’il va t1]]
   e. [FocP où, [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il va t1]]]]
   f. [IntP Oùj [F t1 ce [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il va t1]]]]]
   g. [TP c’est quand, [qu’il prends ses vacances t1]]
   h. [FocP quand, [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il prends ses vacances t1]]]]
   i. [IntP Quandj [F t1 ce [que [TP c’est t1 [qu’il prends ses vacances t1]]]]]

5. More on ce que.

⇒ The question of how the embedded question in (42) should be analysed must now be faced:

(42) Je ne sais pas ce que c’est/était
   ‘I don’t know this that this is’ = I don’t know what this is/was

⇒ They are the standard French counterparts of the colloquial (43) and (44):

(43) J’sais pas quoi que c’est/était
(44) Je sais pas c’est/était quoi

(43) is the embedded counterpart of (17e) –Quoi qu’c’est?– and so is (44) in ‘play ground’ French (see Poletto & Pollock (2021, appendix)). C’est/était quoi? is a fine root question in Standard
French. In both (43) and (44) *quoi* is standing in a focus position, the HLP one in (43) and the post-copula one in (44). Let me then suggest that (42) too starts off as (45), just as (43) and (44) do, where *quoi* is lexical, as it must be:

(45)  \[ce \text{ [est/était [FocP quoi]]}\]

As (46) shows, in the next steps of the derivation of (42) *quoi* moves to the HLP interrogative/relative slot of all embedded questions in standard French rather than to the HLP pre-*que* focus layer of (43) or to the LLP one of (44):

(46)  \[Je ne sais pas \text{ [Int/RelP quoi [que c’est tj]]}\]

⇒ That interrogative/relative layer does not check for a focus feature. If it did, all embedded questions and free relatives in French such as *Je ne sais pas ce qu’il a lu, J’aime ce que tu fais* etc. would be ungrammatical. Let me now suggest (47a):

(47a) Void Relative/Interrogative *quoi* whenever it is not a focus position.

(47a) is very much in the spirit of Hans’s (1976, (173)) ‘Pas-De-Quoi’ rule, which he formulated as in (47b):

(47) b. \[\text{[CP quoi x que]} \Rightarrow [\text{CP φ x que}]\]

⇒ In (47b) the string to the left of *que* is that of ‘standard’ interrogatives and relatives. Hans explicitly stated (cf. Obenauer (1976, 120)) that *quoi* in *Quoi qu’il te dise...* was not included in the CP in (47b). This translates into my idea that *quoi* in such relatives is in a focus position, hence not erasable, despite the fact that it *is* in the CP layer. Although Hans’s ‘Pas-De-Quoi’ was formulated in a framework of generative grammar that made crucial use of contexts predicates, extrinsic rule ordering etc. it shares with my (47a) the idea that the phenomenon it attempts to describe is specific to (Modern) French. Naturally a wider scope principle should replace (47a) when/if one is discovered.

⇒ Applying (47a) to (46) will yield (48a) and (48b) upon merging of *ce* for identifying/licensing purposes.7

7 One should ask why the same derivation does not yield root questions like (i):

(i) **Ce QUOI que tu as fait?**

Munaro (1999) observed that there are acceptable root questions of precisely that type in some Northern Italian Dialects. This is illustrated in (ii), (iii) or (iv):

(ii) Sen-che fi-yen? (Valdôtain, Chatillon, Munaro’s (3a))

Ce que fais-tu ? = That that you do ? = What are you doing ?

(iii) Chel-ca fiv adress? (Northern Lombard, Albosaggia in Valtellina, Munaro’s (8b))

Ce que (tu) fais maintenant ? = That that you do now? = What are you doing now?

(iv) Kwe che devo catar? (Central Northern Piemontesi, Borgofranco d’Ivrea, Munaro’s (26a))

Ce que (je) dois acheter = That that (I) must buy? = What should I buy?

Nicola argued in that work that demonstratives like *sen, chel* and *kwe* are (re)interpreted as interrogative wh-words preceding and/or agglutinating to the complementiser *che* or *ca*. This does not distinguish these demonstratives from *ce*, which also ‘agglutinates’ to *que*, the pair coming out as /sk/ phonetically. On the view that *sen/chel/kwe* in such examples, just like French *ce*, are merged to license the null antecedent of these questions it is the unacceptability of French (i) that should be considered unexpected. Why French should differ from those NIDs in that respect remains to be understood.
Quoi and its null counterpart are determiners of CHOSE. So the full parse of (42) is (49):

(48) [Je ne sais pas [InterrogativeP QUOI [que c’est t1]]]

One should generalise this to all Standard French free relatives and embedded questions, as sketched in (50), even though in (50) the post-verbal input position of the null antecedent is not a focus position. If so the underlying structure of French free relatives and embedded questions are surprisingly close to their overt English counterparts.

(50) a. Je ferai [ce [RelP QUOI CHOSE] [que tu veux t1]]
b. Je prendrai [ce [RelP QUOI CHOSE] [que tu me donneras t1]]
c. Dis moi [ce [IntP QUOI CHOSE] [que tu veux t1]]
d. Je ne sais pas [ce [IntP QUOI CHOSE] [qu’elle me donnera t1]]

(47a) cannot replace the idea defended above according to which, say, Qu’est-ce que c’est? and Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’il a dit? the interrogative clitic que voids quoi. This is because in the derivations repeated in (51) and (52) the deleted quoi is actually standing in the HLP focus position, hence could not be ‘voided’ by (47a).

(51) a. [[FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est t1]]]]
b. [[SC FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est t1]]] que]
c. [[SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est t1]]] que]
d. [[IntP Quej [tp t1] c SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [c’est t1]]] t1]]

(52) a. [[TP c’est [FocP quoi, [qu’il a dit t1]]]]
b. [[FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est [FocP t1 [qu’il a dit t1]]]]]
c. [[SC FocP quoi, [que [TP c’est [FocP t1 [qu’il a dit t1]]]] que]
d. [[SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est [FocP t1 [qu’il a dit t1]]]] que]
e. [[IntP Quej [tp t1] c SC ce [FocP QUOI, [que [TP c’est [FocP t1 [qu’il a dit t1]]]]] t1]]

6. On Quoi and pied-piping of prepositions.

Consider example (53):

(53) a. A quoi as-tu pensé?
b. J’ai pensé à quoi tu as pensé
c. Sur quoi comptes-tu?
d. Je compte sur quoi tu comptes

Pied piping of de, contre, pour, en, dans, etc. also yields perfectly fine ‘standard’ SCLI and C(omplex) I(nversion) questions and free relatives, as illustrated in (54) and (55):
a. De quoi as-tu peur?
   b. Contre quoi ces gens manifestent-ils ?
   c. Pour quoi ferait-il des efforts ?
   d. En quoi Pierre est-il coupable ?

(54)  
(55)  
(56)

Ce in ce à quoi, ce sur quoi in (56b) is merged to license/identify the null antecedents crossing over their quoi determiner and the preceding preposition, just as the lexical antecedents in (56a) do:

(54), (55), (56a, b) show that lexical quoi in Standard French does move to the Interrogative/relative layers of the HLP if and only if it pied-pipes a preposition (cf. (56c)). Why is that?

Taking (47a) seriously suggests (57):

The feature in question is likely to be responsible for the well-known fact that prepositions in French ban clitic pronouns as in (58b) but is unlikely to be a focus feature per se because fine examples like (59) should probably be excluded if it was:

(58) a. Il pense à {lui, elle, eux, toi, moi, quoi}
   b. *Il pense à {le, la, ils, te, me, que}

(59) a. Cette loi, il a voté contre/pour ‘That law, he voted for/against (it)’
   b. Cette loi, il s’est assis dessus ‘That law, he sat on (it) (= ignored it)’

Putting aside the (important) question of the exact nature of the feature just hypothesised, (57) will allow lexical quoi to survive in all of (53), (54) and (55) despite it having moved to the interrogative layer of the HLP, a non focus position. In (56c) no such ‘protection’ from (47a) exists which triggers deletion of quoi, yielding (56d). (57) also accounts for perfectly fine P+quoi est-ce que root questions such as (60) and for quasi minimal pairs like (61a) vs. (61b) vs. (61c):

(60) a. Sur quoi est-ce qu’elle compte?
   b. A quoi est-ce que tu fais allusion?

(61) a. En quoi est-ce que ça me regarde ?
   b. Qu’ (*quoi) est-ce que tu regardes ?
   c. Quoi (*que) qu’tu regardes?

6. A final riddle:

Let us finally consider the fine clefts in (62):
(62)  a. Qu’est-ce donc que Marie aime ? What is it then that Marie likes?
    b. Qu’était-ce donc que Marie aimait ? What was it then that Marie liked?

⇒ These examples are the que variants of the sentences in (63) discussed in the previous section, with one caveat: Que in (62) must strand donc, while qui doesn’t have to: Qui donc est/était-ce que Marie aime/aimait are fine clefts.

(63)  a. Qui est-ce donc que Marie aime ? Who is it then that Marie likes?
    b. Qui était-ce donc que Marie aimait ? Who was it then that Marie liked?

⇒ The que in (62) is a clitic:

(64)  a. *Que, à ton avis, est-ce donc que Marie aime ?
    b. *Que, à ton avis, était-ce donc que Marie aimait ?

⇒ There’s no way clitic que in (62) can be the interrogative predicate que I argued for above: the clefts in (62) are not embedded in a qu’est-ce que question. Therefore no (lexical) quoi in (70) can be erased by que the way it is in (35)-(40). Why then are such clefts well-formed since it appears that clitic que has necessarily moved to their focus position? The very same problem arises for 17th century questions like (65), from Molière’s Le Misanthrope:

(65) Qu’est-ce donc? Qu’avez-vous?

⇒ Some French speakers still occasionally produce Qu’est-ce donc? in jest to imitate ‘grand siècle’ style rather than (66), to be analysed as Qu’est-ce que c’est? was above.

(66)  Qu’est-ce qu’il y a ? Qu’avez-vous ?

⇒ This final puzzle can be solved on the view that in the input of (62) in Modern ‘elevated’ French the constituent Que+donc is not a clitic and can bear the focus feature required in (67a) and (68a), though que, its clitic determiner, must still cliticise to est/était before hopping to IntP –(67b) and (68b) gloss over SCLI ‘inverting’ subject ce and est/était—

(67)  a. [C’était [FocusP [que donc]i [que Marie aimait t1]]
    b. [Quej était ce [FocusP [j donc]i [que Marie aimait t1]]

(68)  a. [C’était [FocusP [que donc]]]
    b. [Quei était ce [FocusP [i donc]]]

⇒ Suppressing donc in such sentences yields (69), which strike me as unacceptable in Modern French, although perceived by some/many as living fossils (‘#’):

(69)  a. */# Qu’était-ce que Marie aimait ?
    b. */# Qu’est/était-ce ?

8 Although neither sentence in (69b) belongs to my French Qu’est-ce? sounds less ‘passé’ to my ear than Qu’était-ce?. This suggests that est in such questions might be analysed as ε. If so, Qu’est-ce? might still be
7. Concluding remarks.

If the arguments above are correct, they show that Standard English free relatives and their French counterparts in (70)-(71) are surprisingly close structurally despite their massive surface difference and so are (72) and (73) in (literary) English and Italian (cf. Pollock 2023):

(70) [Ce [QUOI CHOSE]i [que je t’ai dit ti]] n’est pas vrai
(71) [What THING]i [I told you ti] isn’t true
(72) [That [THING]i [which I told you ti]] isn’t true
(73) [Quel [CHE COSA]i [che ti ho detto ti]] non è vero

My analysis also suggests that one crucial element of Hans’s earliest work his ‘Pas-de Quoi’ rule was essentially right. Finally It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the many references above to work with/by Cecilia and Nicola show that my own work over the last 20 years would not have been possible without the extremely productive international collaboration that Hans started and headed for many years within the UMR 7320 program “Architecture of the clause –articulation and interpretation of its functional structure”.

References


Chomsky, N. (2021) ‘Minimalism: where are we now, and where can we hope to go’. 言語研究 (Gengo Kenkyu) 160: 1–41 (2021)


marginally analysed as a Qu’est-ce? in Qu’est + ce QUOI CHOSE, que c’est ti? followed by some implicit free relative. This recalls questions like Qu’est-ce qu’un homme/un bon livre? which Munaro & Pollock (2005, 593) argued were derived by est deletion from Qu’est-ce qu’un homme/un bon livre (est). The est deletion/non lexicalisation analysis of such clauses is supported by the pair in (i), minimally contrasting with (ii). (i) should evidently be seen in the same light as (iii), which argues for the presence of EST in (i).

(i) Qu’est-ce que cela vs. *ça EST ?
(ii) Qu’est-ce que c’est cela/ça ?
(iii) Cela est (bon) vs. *ça est (bon)

How the implicit relative is rebuilt in Qu’est-ce? if analysed as sketched here remains to be worked out.
Grammar, Universidad de Alcalà - Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia - Universidad Autònoma de Madrid, pp.165-194.

Munaro N. & J-Y Pollock (2005), "Qu’est-ce que (qu)‐est-ce que ?" in The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Syntax (G. Cinque & R. Kayne (eds), Oxford University Press, 542-606

Obenauer H.-G (1976), Etudes de syntaxe interrogative du français, Quoi, combien et le complèmenteur, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1976.


The last four references and the work this presentation is based on will appear as chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in:
