On predicative copular sentences, event interpretation and (the absence of) agreement
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French and Hebrew have a copular construction, which we argue is predicative, but in which a deictic element is required in addition to the copula (French ce or in its place (Hebrew ze) (1):

(1) a. Les enfants c’est chouette (French)
    the.pl children.pl CE-be.sg great.sg
b. yeladim ze macxiq (Hebrew)
    children.mpl ZE.ms funny-ms

Further properties of this construction, noted in particular in the literature on Hebrew (e.g., Danon 2012), are the absence of agreement and the particular semantics of the subject. Agreement is blocked in (1) (compare with (2)): the subject is plural but the copula, actually, a copular pronoun PRON in Hebrew (cf. Doron 1983, 1986) and the adjective are sing in French and masc.sing in Hebrew. Copular sentences without CE/ZE would require agreement, cf. (3):

(2) a. *Les enfants ce sont chouettes.
    the.pl children.pl CE be.pl great.pl
b. *yeladim ze/elu macxiqim
    children.mpl ZE.ms/mpl funny.mpl

(3) a. Les enfants *est/sont chouette*(s).
    the.pl children.pl be.sg/be.pl great.*sg/pl
b. yeladim *hu/hem macxiqim
    children PRON-ms/PRON-mpl funny-mpl

In addition, CE/ZE sentences in (1) differ from non-CE/ZE ones in (3) in their interpretation: while (3), with the correct agreement, illustrate run of the mill predicative sentences, the subject in (1) is understood as a participant in an underspecified event/situation: having children, raising children, being surrounded with children is fun, as noted, originally, by Heller (1999) for Hebrew.

The similarities between French and Hebrew, noted here for the first time, suggest that an explanation for the particular properties of CE/ZE sentences in (1) should not be linked to language-specific properties of Hebrew or French, but rather to more general conditions on this kind of copular sentences. (We note, incidentally, the existence of similar constructions in Swedish (Wechsler, 2011), Norwegian (Enger, 2004), Brasilian Portuguese (Foltran & Rodrigues 2013); but we leave them aside as they differ from French and Hebrew in not requiring the deictic element.)

In this paper, we argue, departing from previous literature, that the CE/ZE sentences in (1) are predicative copular sentences, i.e., they express a basic subject - predicate relation. We further argue that their specific properties derive exclusively from structural and interpretational conditions on the subject of the predication.

Prima facie, CE/ZE sentences in (1) pattern with non-predicative ones, which require PRON in Hebrew (e.g., Doron (op. cit)) and ce in French (e.g. Kupferman 1979; Amary 2012, 2014 and references therein). Previous literature has based the semantic analysis of (1) on this split and has proposed that they should be analyzed as equatives (Greenberg, 2008, Danon 2012), or specificational sentences (Amary, 2012) in the sense of Higgins (1979). There is however, little semantic ground for these analyses. First, the sentences in (1) cannot express an equation (i.e., they do not mean that the reference of ‘(the) children’ is identical to the reference of ‘a fun thing’- assuming with Greenberg 2008 that the adjective is constructed with a silent nominal thing). This is confirmed by the absence of equative meaning even in cases where a nominal, e.g., idée, is overtly realized: Ce film c’était une bonne idée ‘This movie, CE.was a good idea’ is not equative either.

Moreover, if Greenberg were correct, then the restriction of the postcopular adjectives to intersective ones would be unexplained. For example (4a-b) should be grammatical, since there is no restriction on modifying thing by non-intersective adjectives such as pauvre and future.

| (4) | a. *L’enfance c’est pauvre. | a’. *yaldu’t ze ‘ani |
|     | the.childhoood CE.is poor = a poor thing | childhood ZE poor |
| b. *La vieillesse c’est future. | b’. *ziqna ze ‘atidi |
|     | the old.age CE.is future = a future thing | old.age ZE future |
The CE/ZE sentences in (1) cannot have a specificational reading either. This reading requires the second term to specify a value on a list. As noted, however, the element on the right of the copula is not referential and therefore cannot specify a value.

Instead we argue that CE/ZE sentences in (1) are true predications, an analysis supported by the impossibility to question the post-copular expression using a who-question (Roy 2006, 2013):

(5) a. John is Superman / my brother: Who is John? (equivative type)
   b. The best cook is Beverly: Who is the best cook? (specificational type)
   c. Les enfants c’est chouette: #Qui c’est les enfants?
   the children CE.is great who CE.is the children?

and compare with:  d. C’est comment les enfants? (predicational type)
   CE.is how the children? ≈ how is it to have children?

Under this view, the three salient properties of the CE/ZE sentences in (1), namely the obligatory presence of CE/ZE, the absence of agreement and the event/situation related reading, are quite intriguing. We argue that these properties are, in fact, related.

Copular constructions such as (1) contain two “subjects”, the lower, quasi-referential weak pronoun ce/ze (viz. Bennis 1986, Vikner 1994 on Dutch het, Hazout 1994 on Hebrew ze) in Spec/T and the higher, event/situation-referring subject in Spec/Subj, a position restricted to subjects of predications including ‘non-canonical’ subjects such as inverted predicates of copular constructions, dative experiences of gustar-type verbs, etc. (Cardinaletti 2004, Rizzi 2003, Rizzi & Shlonsky 2007). In other words, we claim that the structure of (1) resembles (6), as in Koster’s (1978) treatment of subject clauses:

(6) Elever des enfants / jouer avec des enfants / etc. c'est chouette.
   raise.inf indef.pl children play.inf with indef.pl children CE.is great

This resemblance is somewhat misleading, however, in that the subject of (1) is not a reduced infinitive (cf., Wechsler 2011). French allows generically-interpreted indefinite plurals to appear in object position (of infinitives) but not as subjects of copular constructions like (1):

(7) a. Elever des enfants c’est chouette.
   raise.inf indef.pl children CE.is great
   b. *Des enfants c’est chouette.
   indef.pl children CE.is great

The similarity between infinitival subjects and the subject of (1) is that both involve an event/situation. By standard event-semantic assumptions (e.g., Parsons 1990, Higginbotham 1995, Kratzer 1996), the event/situation is introduced by the predicative head, namely here the verb: λe. raise(e). In (1), however, there is only a minimal structure containing an underspecified verb, the event variable it introduces, and the theme/patient of the event; perhaps a bare VP lacking an external argument and a tense/finiteness specification.

This analysis derives straightforwardly another (hitherto unnoticed) property of these sentences, namely, that the subject can only be interpreted as the theme/patient/affectee of the event/situation and not an agent:

(8) Deux amants c’est immoral (ex adapted from Wechsler 2011)
   two lovers CE.is immoral = to have two lovers is immoral.
   ≠ two lovers who love each other is immoral.

The obligatory collective interpretation of the subject (in e.g., (8); see Danon 2012) follows from the fact that these plural subjects can only be mapped onto a theme/patient and not a subject of the event/situation.

We further argue that “non-agreement” in e.g., (1) is neither non-agreement nor default agreement but full agreement with the subject in Spec/T, namely with CE/ZE. Other, non-predicative, uses of CE/ZE are not discussed.