The system of sentence structure in French is rich and complex. It presents forms that diverge from the canonical order, have the same meaning, but serve very different discursive functions. This talk examines the underpinnings of sentence structure variation and how the factors that govern this variation are manifested in French. Johnson specifically examines one structure known as the c'est-cleft, and present results from three empirical studies (both quantitative and qualitative) designed to inform two aspects of the cleft, its meaning and its use in discourse, which are still debated in the French literature. The results show that the cleft does not semantically contribute to the meaning of the sentence, and that the effects arising from its use (specifically exhaustivity and contrast) are pragmatic. The results also show that the cleft is not systematically used for marking focus on all parts of a sentence (contra work by Lambrecht). Rather its use is constrained by two major factors (i) subjecthood and (ii) the state of belief of participants in discourse. Thus, Johnson argues that the occurrence of the cleft in discourse is not a categorical phenomenon but is gradient, and she proposes a unified model in terms of ranked defeasible constraints. Johnson’s research raises questions both about sentence structure variation in second language acquisition and about teaching grammar in context, and concludes by discussing the problems non-native speakers encounter in learning to use and interpret the c'est-cleft in a pragmatically appropriate way.