

Subject clitics and preverbal negation in European French: Variation, acquisition, diatopy and diachrony



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Abstract

This contribution aims to propose a corpus-based analysis of variation and acquisition of subject clitics and preverbal negation in European French within a diglossic approach. The investigation collates previous and new, contemporary and diachronic, adult and child data from France and Belgium. The results point to an analysis of subject clitics as agreement markers in contemporary French. The negative particle *ne* is eliminated from the list of arguments against the morphological analysis of subject clitics, since negative utterances with agreement markers display postverbal negation only. A strong correspondence between two characteristics, i.e. morpho-syntactic status of subject clitics (agreement markers vs. arguments) and type of negation (simple vs. discontinuous), is established supporting the hypothesis on grammatical consistency and pointing to the existence of two different grammars of French (labeled chronologically G₁ and G₂). Diatopic data inform us that the correspondence seems to hold throughout France, but that diglossia does not appear to apply (or at least applies differently) when reaching the Belgian frontier. Finally, adult and child diachronic data (17th–19th century) also display an interesting co-occurrence in terms of clitics and negation, and invite us to further our understanding of the acquisition and processing of expletive clitics.

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1. Introduction

The comparative study of preverbal clitics in colloquial and standard French represents a lively and inspiring area for research in a number of different perspectives. Indeed, the debate surrounding the distribution and forms of these preverbal elements, i.e. subject (*je* 'I', *tu* 'you-sg', *il* 'he', etc.), object (*me* 'me', *te* 'you-sg', *le* 'him', etc.), and adverbial clitics (*y* 'there', *en* 'from there'), together with the negative particle *ne*, is of interest to (at least) morpho-syntacticians studying French in synchrony, diachrony, diatopy, and/or cross-linguistically, language acquisitionists, sociolinguists, and cognitive scientists. This contribution brings these complementary points of view together by examining subject clitics and negation in new child data and by considering the results in the light of the other perspectives. The main goals of this paper are to contribute to (i) the debates surrounding the morpho-syntactic status of subject clitics and preverbal negation in European French, and (ii) the discussion on the formalization of variation in this language in synchrony, diachrony, and

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diatopy. The investigation supports the following hypotheses: (i) subject clitics are agreement markers in colloquial French and syntactic subjects in standard French, and (ii) diglossia can account for this variation in France.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical debates on the morpho-syntactic status of subject clitics and preverbal negation, and on the formalization of variation in French. Section 3 examines subject clitics and negation in new child data from south-eastern France (12,969 utterances by 19 children). Section 4 turns to diatopy, and attempts to outline the geographical area where diglossia applies by examining fieldwork undertaken on child and adult central, Parisian, northern and Belgian French. Section 5 then assesses the plausibility of the current existence of diglossia in the brain/mind of French native speakers against adult and child data from the 17th century onwards. Finally, section 6 contains concluding remarks and leads for further research.

2. Variation in contemporary adult French

Preverbal clitics in French can be subject (*je* 'I', *tu* 'you-sg', *il* 'he', etc.), object (*me* 'me', *te* 'you-sg', *le* 'him', etc.), adverbial (*y* 'there', *en* 'from there'), or negative clitics (preverbal marker *ne* 'neg'). This contribution focuses on two of these categories, i.e. subject and negative clitics.

2.1. The morpho-syntactic status of subject clitics

A particularly long-standing debate surrounds the morpho-syntactic analysis of subject clitics in French, whether in traditional grammar or in more recent frameworks such as generative linguistics (overview in Heap and Roberge, 2001). In his classic work on standard French, Kayne (1975) described these elements as proper syntactic arguments occupying the canonical subject position, and cliticizing to the finite verb at the post-syntactic, phonological level (1a). Kayne's work followed by other influential investigations (Brandi and Cordin, 1989; Cardinaletti and Starke, 1999; De Cat, 2005; Rizzi, 1986; among others) hence analyzed these formatives as morphologically independent words fulfilling a syntactic role. In this configuration, when a subject clitic and a DP co-occur, the syntactic structure represents an instance of left-dislocation (also labeled 'Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD)' after Cinque, 1990), and the DP occupies a topic position above the subject position (TopP, as in (1b); Rizzi, 1997).¹ Since definiteness characterizes topics, indefinite entities are not expected to occur in TopP, as shown in (1c–d)^{2,3}:

- (1) a. [_{IP} il parle]
 he speaks
 'he speaks'
- b. [_{TopP} l' enfant [_{IP} il parle]]
 the child he speaks
 'the child speaks'
- c. * [_{TopP} un enfant [_{IP} il parle]]
 a child he speaks
 'a child speaks'
- d. * [_{TopP} quelqu'un [_{IP} il parle]]
 someone he speaks
 'someone speaks'

In the 1970s–1980s, (socio-)linguists started to examine syntactic variation between written/standard French on the one hand and spoken/colloquial French on the other hand. Questions arose on the status of the latter with regard to the former (e.g. Blanche-Benveniste, 1983; Lambrecht, 1981), and structures that had previously been stigmatized were gradually quantified and described as belonging to non-standard varieties of French (e.g. Hulk, 1991; Zribi-Hertz, 1994). The co-occurrence of DPs and subject clitics in oral French is hence now well documented.⁴ First, it is established that the

¹ I leave aside the question of whether the DP is base-generated in the left periphery or copied to it (e.g. De Cat, 2007a vs. Grohmann, 2003).

² The term 'indefinite entities' (or 'QPs') refers to: (i) DPs whose determiners bear a quantifying value only, e.g. *un* 'a-masc', *une* 'a-fem', *des* 'some', *tous* 'all', *chaque* 'each', *aucun* 'no', etc., and (ii) indefinite pronouns, e.g. *personne* 'nobody', *rien* 'nothing', etc. (Grevisse and Goosse, 2008:738).

³ This definition and exclusions are controversial though. Reinhart (1981) for instance clearly distinguishes topichood from old information, and De Cat (2007b), among others, qualifies the exclusions reported in (c) and (d).

⁴ Note however that Baude (2006:26) reports that France is far behind with regard to oral databases. Gadet (2009:115) relates this lag to 'the influence of the "ideology of the standard" and, more specifically, the importance of normative attitudes'.

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