



French subject clitics are not agreement markers

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Received 19 November 2003; received in revised form 18 February 2004; accepted 18 February 2004

Available online 20 April 2004

Abstract

In spite of the substantial literature dedicated to it, the status of French subject clitics is still an unresolved issue within morpho-syntactic theory. Two main analyses have been proposed and defended over the past three decades: one advocating that French subject clitics are syntactic arguments bearing a theta-role and the other viewing such clitics as inflectional morphemes on the verb. This paper demonstrates that the empirical basis motivating the morphological analysis of French subject clitics is much narrower than has been assumed in the literature and shows that the implementation of such an analysis faces numerous theoretical and empirical difficulties. It concludes that the limited similarities between the behaviour of French subject clitics and that of morphemes should be treated as accidental rather than as decisive factors in favour of a morphological analysis. Under a derivational approach to grammar, the syntactic analysis appears to be the only viable one. © 2004 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Affix; Clitic; Dislocation; French; Information structure; Subject; Topic

1. Introduction and background

Two opposing analyses of French subject clitics have been proposed in the literature. According to the “syntactic” analysis, French subject clitics are syntactic entities (i.e. elements available for syntactic operations) bearing a θ -role and which transit via the canonical [spec,TP] subject position, from where they cliticise phonologically on the verb. These are the broad lines of the position held by [Kayne \(1975\)](#), [Rizzi \(1986\)](#), [Laenzlinger \(1998\)](#) and [Belletti \(1999\)](#) among others. According to the “morphological” analysis, French subject clitics are agreement morphemes generated directly on the finite verb in the lexicon (or at a lexicon-syntax interface). This analysis is generally argued to apply to spoken French only (and not to standard/formal/written French). Proponents of the

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“morphological” analysis include Jaeggli (1982), Roberge (1986), Hulk (1986), Auger (1994) and Miller and Monachesi (2003).

The mechanisms implementing the morphological analysis have been described in, e.g. Cummins and Roberge (1994) and Auger (1994) and related work. Cummins and Roberge (1994) propose that Romance clitics are associated with lexical roots prior to syntax (more precisely at the proposed lexicon-syntax interface). At that point, the clitics are said to be mere bundles of features. The ungrammatical representations are later filtered out at LF (for semantic reasons—which are left vague) and PF (where language-particular constraints are defined, in the form of templates). An additional filtering-out mechanism is argued to operate in the Computational Component of grammar in the form of agreement between the clitic and the empty category in argument position.¹ Auger (1994: 196) proposes that *verbal forms are directly generated by morphological processes* (though these processes are not explicitly defined) and argues that no template needs to be postulated to derive the French facts. She assumes that French object clitics bear a Case feature (to account for the fact that object doubling is ungrammatical in that language) and that French subject clitics do not bear any Case feature. Object clitics are thus claimed to be affixes, while subject clitics are (affixal) agreement morphemes.

The remainder of this paper will abstract away from the exact mechanisms at work in the morphological analysis and concentrate on the broader issues raised by such an analysis.

2. Testing the predictions of the morphological analysis

The morphological analysis of French subject clitics has a number of theoretical and empirical consequences, listed in (1).

- (1)
 - a. Subject-verb agreement can be marked twice morphologically.
 - b. Subject clitics should not be available for syntactic operations independently of their host.
 - c. Preverbal clitics appearing between the subject clitic and the verb also have to be analysed as affixes. These elements include *en*, *y*, object clitics and the negation particle *ne*.
 - d. Subject doubling is predicted (i.e. the cooccurrence of an XP in [spec, TP] and of an adjacent subject clitic).

To my knowledge, these consequences have not been fully investigated in the literature. I address them in turn in Sections 2.1–2.4 and show that they turn out to be problematic for the morphological analysis, at least in its current form.²

¹ It is far from clear how the empty category is endowed with the relevant features in the first place. Object clitics have argument status in spoken French (Auger, 1994), so the verb cannot possibly select another (yet empty) argument with the relevant features.

² A reviewer pointed out that some of the facts discussed in the following might not be problematic (or *would arise in different terms*) for the morphological analysis if it was modified in some ways. I do not dispute this. The point I would like to make is that, until it is shown that the morphological analysis can be amended to account satisfactorily for ALL the issues discussed in this paper (which is no small task), it might be wiser not to assume that it applies to (the main varieties of) spoken French.

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