Reanalysis of negatives as polarity markers? The last 400 years of decline of the French preverbal negative clitic[☆]

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Abstract

Typically, the evolution of negation involves an intermediate stage where a post-verbal negator doubles a preverbal marker. The decline of the preverbal marker is generally understood as a form of weakening, through mechanisms that remain rather vague in the literature. A precise hypothesis is proposed by Anne Breitbarth in her analysis of the negative cycle in Germanic (2009). She claims that the acquisition of negative status by the post-verbal item causes the preverbal item to become a polarity marker. The marker should therefore increasingly display a preponderance of uses in non-negative environments. Whether the predictions made by this dual reanalysis hypothesis are supported by the history of French negation is assessed in this paper. Data from 17th and 18th century vernacular French texts (*Textes français privés des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*), as well as from the contemporary vernacular (*Corpus de français parlé parisien des années 2000*), show that the French preverbal negative contradicts the predictions of the dual reanalysis hypothesis in being increasingly used in negative environments. The causes of the decline of the preverbal negative in French are proposed to relate to its membership of a clitic cluster that is susceptible to phonological reductions.
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1. Introduction

Sentential negation marking evolves in many languages following a cycle (Larrivée and Ingham, 2011; Gelderen, 2011; Breitbarth et al., 2013), where a preverbal marker is supplemented with a post-verbal item that survives as the sole negator.[1] The fact that the intermediate stage conjoins two markers, as illustrated by the following idealised sequences

(1) *I*   *ne*   *seye*   *not*   (Middle English)
     1PS-NOM   NEG   say-1PS-PR   NEG
     'I don't say.'

(2) *Je*   *ne*   *dis*   *pas*   (French)
     1PS-NOM   NEG   say-1PS-PR   NEG
     'I don't say.'

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[1] On the appreciation of the relative importance of word order for the evolution of negation, see van der Auwera (2011).

poses the well-known challenge of negative concord (for a general assessment, Giannakidou, 2000; Zeijlstra, 2004; Swart, 2010). Concord of two negative markers seems to contradict the expectation of compositionality, following which each negative item should make its own contribution to the interpretation of the sentence and therefore cancel the other out to yield a positive sentence. One long-standing way to resolve this apparent contradiction has been to deny negative status for the 'extra' concording marker, which therefore does not introduce a negative value and thus does not give rise to cancellation. This strategy is adopted by Anne Breitbarth in her analysis of the negative cycle in Germanic (2009). She claims that the acquisition of negative status by the post-verbal item causes the preverbal item to become a polarity marker, leaving only one negative standing. A polarity marker is an item that relates to "expressive" environments such as conditionals, adversatives and *do*-focus (Breitbarth and Haegeman, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether the predictions made by this dual reanalysis hypothesis are supported by the history of French negation. The prediction would be that preverbal negative *ne* becomes a polarity marker at least from the 18th century, when the post-verbal items *pas* and *point* are incontrovertibly negative (as demonstrated by uses as constituent negative, in fragment answers and with double negation readings). *Ne* should thus experience a dramatic decrease in the rate of sentential negation that it introduces on its own, and an explosion in the percentages of non-negative readings. The later would allegedly comprise such uses as exceptive and expletive configurations: exceptive uses refer to post-verbal exceptive focus particle *que* with a preverbal *ne* (as in *Il n'a rencontré que Bart* '3PS-NOM *ne* have-3PS-PR met *que*-EXCEPTIVE Bart' ''He met nobody but Bart''); expletives relate to *ne* in subordinates that do not contribute an independent negative value (as in *Je crains qu'il ne parle* '1PS-NOM fear-1PS-PR that 3PS-NOM *ne* talk-3PS-PR-SUBJ' ''I fear that he might talk'' rather than ''I fear that he might not talk''). The respective weight of these uses is therefore what this paper investigates. It establishes their quantitative profile in 17th and 18th century vernacular French texts (*Textes français privés des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*), as well as in the contemporary vernacular (*Corpus de français parlé parisien des années 2000*), in the hope of getting closer to the competence of speakers which is the locus of the reanalysis. The results show that expletive uses become non-existent in the contemporary vernacular, with the exceptive occurring at relatively stable rates. The predictions of the dual reanalysis hypothesis are thus not supported by the evolution of French, which shows that the joint use of two negative markers is a common and perfectly respectable grammatical state of affairs (not to mention triple and quadruple negatives, van der Auwera, 2011).

2. Reanalyses

2.1. The compositionality puzzle

Clausal negatives in some languages come in pairs. A preverbal item may be subsequently supplemented by a post-verbal item. This observation raises the question of why two items are found in French, Middle English and Old High German, when one item suffices in Latin and in standard contemporary English and German, and which of these two items is the 'real' negative. An answer is proposed by some versions of the minimalist framework (Gelderen, 2011; Zeijlstra, 2004), accounting for cyclic pathways in the evolution of grammatical expressions that integrate the generalisations proposed by grammaticalisation theory (Eckard, 2006 i.a.). A grammatical expression may be conveyed by a single marker that has semantic and formal autonomy. The marker can become more grammatical by entering the architecture of functional projections where it acquires a feature that is directly interpretable. This feature makes it possible for the marker to enter into relations with other items of the same grammatical expression. These relations lead the marker to become more abstract and be reanalysed as bearing an uninterpretable feature that must be licensed by an item with an interpretable feature. The acquisition of an abstract uninterpretable feature may lead the marker to disappear, or to relate to some other category of expression. The movement from autonomous to interpretable to uninterpretable to zero or something else finds its functional motivation in frequency factors, where increased use reduces the autonomy of markers, and its formal motivation is the acquisition of increasingly abstract features calling for more concrete expressions to be formed. That would be how dual marking develops in languages, where only the marker with interpretable feature is the 'real' expression of the grammatical category concerned.

This perspective serves as a background to the analysis proposed by Breitbarth (2009) in her analysis of the evolution of negation in West Germanic languages. She asks the general question of why negation should be expressed by two markers. The particular questions are why the preverbal marker should be lost quickly in most West Germanic languages, and what causes its disappearance. The answer goes one step further than the minimalist perspective in arguing that there is ambiguity between the uninterpretable and 'something else' stages. The proposal is to do away with the uninterpretable stage, and have a three-way pathway from autonomous to interpretable to something else. In the same way that the post-verbal negator starting out as a polarity item goes directly to interpretable status, the interpretable preverbal clitic turns into a polarity marker. This is convergent with the suggestion by van Gelderen that ''[n]egatives are specified for the negative value of PolP and if the negative quality somehow weakens, it is reanalysed as a PolP head whose polarity is not specified.'' (Gelderen, 2011:295). This polarity value presumably equates with a non-veridical