

## Microvariation in French Negation Markers: A Historical Perspective

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### 12.1 Introduction

Studies on the evolution of markers of negation in the languages of the world have been very productive ever since Jespersen's (1917) work on the negation cycle. The goal of the present study on the evolution of French negation markers will be restricted to the discussion of certain facts connected to negation markers and the left periphery which have been too often neglected and sometimes misinterpreted in the literature on historical change. First, we illustrate how the history of the absence of *ne* in certain clauses identified in the lower CP domain must be distinguished from the deletion of the discontinuous IP negation marker *ne* which developed in certain morphosyntactic surroundings in spoken French (Section 12.3). Second, we explore how semantic and syntactic factors may explain the absence of *ne* in interrogative clauses in certain grammars of French (Section 12.4). Most importantly, we want to emphasize the fact that the realization of French negation from a diachronic perspective has never been a homogeneous phenomenon. Just as contemporary grammars of French are numerous and varied, diachronic grammars of French were far from the homogeneous picture too often presented in many studies, even those reporting on the oral form of the language in the past. Such grammars, just like contemporary grammars of French, also displayed microvariation. We therefore demonstrate that French negation had different realizations in diachronic grammars of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. This situation is puzzling. Why, for instance, would the evolution of negation markers within interrogatives

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which display discursive effects be distinct from the one observed in sentential negation? The difference here is clearly not linked to genre distinctions between formal and non-formal registers of speech. This general situation raises questions both for the cyclic development of French negation and for the motivation behind the evolution of negation.

## 12.2 Corpora of Familiar French from France and Quebec

To get an overall view, we used, for Old, Middle, and sixteenth-century French, corpora from two databases: ARTFL (American Research on Trésor de la Langue Française, University of Chicago) and TFA (Textes de Français Ancien, University of Chicago). We also used corpora of familiar French from France and from Quebec. For European non-standard French, our study is based on Lodge's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century corpora of plays, comedies, farces, or vaudevilles that included, among others, rural or urban characters from the lower strata of society, on Chavatte's diary as it was edited by Ernst and Wolf (2002), and on letters written by low-educated people in the north-east of France from Martineau's corpus. We also looked at Héroard's transcript of the speech of Louis XIII as a young child (1605–11). For nineteenth-century French, we used comedies including not well-educated characters. For the beginning of the twentieth century, we looked at Barbusse, an author that includes informal speech in his novels (cf. ARTFL database). Concerning Quebec French, we used Martineau's corpus of letters produced during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Martineau 2003); these family letters were produced by weakly literate people whose purpose was not to have their letters read by a large audience. We also examined plays and comedies written during the nineteenth century in Quebec in which low-stratum characters are represented, as well as Faribault and Portelance's corpus of letters written to Father Bernier by lower-stratum people at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It should be pointed out that the precious pieces of evidence gathered in the relatively few texts written by 'weakly literate' persons must be handled with care: they are not an exact picture of the oral form spoken at the time and they always remain a reconstitution of an image. However, as the oral form of ancient French is lost forever, it is clear that these handwritten texts are particularly important for reconstructing the evolution of spoken French (Ayres-Bennett 2002). In fact, we want to argue that microvariation may be hidden by lack of distinction in corpora registers, and that the use of this material allows us to have a better image of diachronic change.

### 12.3 Absence of *ne*: Left Periphery and Sentential Domains

#### 12.3.1 *Jespersen's cycle*

The Jespersen's cycle in (1) identified three different strategies for the expression of sentential negation from a diachronic perspective. The basic claim was that the fluctuation between different types of negative markers is related to phonetic stress:

- (1) a. a weakly stressed negative marker becomes a clitic: *non*->*ne*;  
 b. and is then strengthened by another element: *ne*...*pas*;  
 c. which comes to be interpreted as the negative marker: *pas*.

Research by Zanuttini (1997: 14) on negation and clausal structure has shown that these three different strategies could also be found at the synchronic level, not only across contemporary Romance languages, but also in different varieties of the same language, namely dialects spoken in Italy. She has indicated that central and northern varieties of Piedmontese use only a postverbal negative marker while other varieties of Piedmontese (towns on the border of Piedmont and Liguria) have a weakly stressed negative marker. The variety spoken in Cairo Montenotte has both a pre- and a postverbal negative marker. In the same manner, it is expected that these identified strategies were also observed at the diachronic level in French, where a variety of negative forms were used at different stages depending often, in the case of French, on the interaction with other grammatical phenomena.

#### 12.3.2 *Pas: sentential, indefinite, and presuppositional readings*

Historical studies on *ne* deletion in non-standard spoken French are still quite divergent regarding the period at which *pas* comes to be interpreted as the only negative marker in the sentence, as in (2a), compared to (2b):

- (2) a. Je veux *pas* y aller.  
       'I don't want to go.'  
 b. Je *ne* veux *pas* y aller.

Some have argued that *ne* deletion was already widespread in the seventeenth century (Valli 1983; Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean 1986; Hausmann 1992; Grieve 1984), while others have shown that its rise is a much more recent phenomenon (Ayres-Bennett 1994; Ashby 1981; Martineau and Mougeon 2003). However, studies on negation in diachrony have often disregarded the various interpretations connected to the use of *ne* or *pas*.

In Old and Middle French, in addition to its negative reading, *pas* (and *point*, *mie*, *neant*) could have an indefinite reading, in polarity contexts

(in interrogative contexts but also in hypothetical, comparative, etc.), as in (3):

- (3) a. *Avés point d'amis?*  
 'Do you have a single friend?'  
 [Ménard's translation: 'Auriez-vous un ami? / Avez-vous le moindre ami?']  
 (*Romances et Pastourelles*, 2. 10. 19; Ménard 1976: 260)
- b. ... devant ne ains, | Fors cest jor, ne l'avoit veüe, | Ne n'atocha a sa char nue | Dont ele fust *pas* empirie  
 'Never before that day he had seen her or touched her naked skin and dishonoured her in any way.'  
 [Buridant's translation: 'Jamais avant ce jour il ne l'avait vue ni n'avait touché à sa peau nue en la déshonorant en quoi que ce soit.']  
 (*Le Chevalier de la charrette*, 4970–3; Buridant 2000: 721)

In this context, *pas* behaves similarly to *rien* and *aucun*, which could also be used as polarity items in Old and Middle French, as in (4) and (5):

- (4) a. Et dit qu'il me fera ennui | Si je de *rien* paroil a lui  
 'And he says that he will make me regret that I speak to him about anything'; [Buridant's translation: 'Et il dit qu'il me fera amèrement regretter que je lui parle de quoi que ce soit']  
 (*Erec*, 2965–6; Buridant 2000: 714)
- b. Le roi ... doubtant *aucun* inconvenient, l'en fist retraire  
 'The king ... afraid of any problem, made him go out.'  
 (*Jehan de Saintré*, 88; Marchello-Nizia 1997: 186)

Whereas it has been shown that use of *aucun* and *rien* as polarity items tends to disappear during the eighteenth century and is nowadays restricted to some dialects, for instance Quebec French (QF), or to some syntactic contexts (Déprez and Martineau 2004; Martineau and Déprez forthcoming), no systematic research, to our knowledge, has been made on the use of *pas* as a polarity item. However, it seems clear that in the sixteenth century, its use is contextually restricted to the interrogative context, as in (5)—cf. Gougenheim (1984: 242). During the seventeenth century, following Muller (1991: 224), this indefinite use of *pas* disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Following Muller (1991), this use would have been maintained in QF in some contexts:

- (i) C' est le plus beau blé qu'il y a *pas* sur le marché.  
 DEM is the most beautiful wheat that 3PS there has NEG on the market  
 'This is the most beautiful wheat that one can find on the market.'

- (5) Et moy, suis-je dans un bain? Suis-je *pas* plus à mon aise que toy?  
 ‘And me, am I in a bath? Am I so less than anything more at ease than you are?’  
 [Muller’s translation: ‘Suis-je si peu que ce soit plus à mon aise que toi?’]  
 (Montaigne, *Essais*, iii. 6; Muller 1991)

The presuppositional use of *pas* in yes/no interrogatives contrasts with its use as an indefinite. In Old and Middle French and in Classical French, *pas* (or *point*) is commonly used with a presuppositional reading without *ne*, in direct interrogative as in (6), and also, more rarely, in indirect interrogatives, as in (7)—cf. Haase (1969), Fournier (1998):

- (6) a. *Middle French*  
 Que te semble de ma nouvelle Espousee? Est elle *pas* belle  
 what you seems of my new wife is she NEG nice  
 Et honneste souffisanment?  
 and honest enough  
 ‘What do you think of my new wife? Isn’t she nice and honest enough?’  
 (*Griseldis*, v. 2430–2; Marchello-Nizia 1997: 306)
- b. *Seventeenth-century French*  
 Piarot t’ es ban fou, sais tu *pas* qu’ nan ne poigera  
 Piarot you is very fool know SCL.2PS neg that they CL.NEG pay  
 poen de Taye...  
 NEG of taxes...  
 ‘Piarot you are a fool, don’t you know that they won’t pay taxes...’  
 (*Agréables Conférences*, iv, l. 177; Deloffre 1999)
- c. *Eighteenth-century French*  
 As-tu *pas* peur qu’ pendant s’ temps-là on n’  
 are-SCL.2PS NEG scare that during this time 1PP NEG  
 mange ton manger que vla  
 eat your food that here  
 ‘Aren’t you afraid that during this time we won’t come and eat your food here’  
 (*La Pipe cassée*, iv. 153–4; Wüest 1985: 252–3)
- (7) *Middle French*  
 ... luy demanda s’il estoit *point* amoureux d’une telle damoiselle...  
 ‘and (he) asked him if he wasn’t in love with a given young lady’  
 (*Cent Nouvelles*, 227. 21; Martin and Wilmet 1980: 33)

In these contexts, absence of *ne* seems to alternate with presence of *ne*, as in (8). As far as it can be seen, the choice is not triggered by formal or informal factors. For instance, we found absence of *ne* in these contexts in well-known seventeenth-century authors such as Sévigné, Vaugelas, Pascal, and Bossuet.

(8) *Medieval French*

N'es tu *pas* aprestée? Qu'est ce?| Temps est que nous aillons a messe.  
 'Are you ready to go? What is it? It's time to go to church'  
 (Anonymous, *Miracle de Saint Jehan Crisothomes*, 271)

In Old French, *ne* alone could also participate to the presuppositional reading of (9), and this last interpretation was sometimes reinforced by discursive elements such as *donc* or *et*.

- (9) N'est la raïne Ysolt ta amie?| -Oïl, par foi, je nel  
 'Isn't the queen Ysolt your friend? Yes, truly, she is and  
 ni mie  
 I don't hide it'  
 (*FolieTristOx*, 386–7; Buridant 2000: 691)

Most studies on *ne* deletion (and statistical results also) have not pointed out the need to distinguish the structures in which *pas* contributes to sentential negation (cf. (2)) from those where *pas* does not trigger a negative force reading (cf. (3), (5)–(8)). In the next section, we examine statistical results with yes/no interrogatives.

### 12.3.3 *Statistical results and yes/no interrogatives*

Martineau and Mougeon (2003) have based their study of sentential negation on a corpus of non-standard French. Their results show clearly that deletion of *ne*, in sentential negation, is a relatively recent phenomenon; the rate of deletion is very low in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but increases markedly during the nineteenth century, as shown in Table 12.1, under the column *Sentential negation*. In Table 12.1, our own results show that the structures in which *pas* has a negative interpretation (as in imperatives or sentential negation IP structures) have distinct results from those where *pas* does not trigger a negative reading (as in yes/no interrogatives and expressive structures with discursive effects).

In the *Agréables Conférences*, a fictitious text considered to be representative of the oral form of French in the seventeenth century, almost one yes/no interrogative out of two (45.4 per cent (10/22)) is found without *ne*, as in the question form in (10) below, with the presence of the positive reinforcer *ban*. Wüest (1985: 252–3) notes three examples from *La Pipe cassée*

TABLE 12.1 Rates of *ne* deletion according to the type of structure.

Periods	Yes–no interrogatives	Negative imperatives	Sentential negation
Old and Middle French	15% (16/108)	0% (0/145)	0.1% (2/1691)
16th century	26% (32/124)	0% (0/29)	0.3% (4/1238)
17th century	26% (14/54)	0% (0/12)	0.4% (4/1171)
18th century	25% (8/32)	0% (0/21)	2% (18/848)
19th century	40% (18/45)	19% (7/37)	45% (326/723)
20th century	27% (4/15)	58% (22/38)	32% (559/1753)

Note: Rates under 'Sentential negation' for the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries are extracted from Martineau and Mougeon (2003).

(eighteenth century) which appear without *ne*. All three are found exclusively in interrogative clauses; two of them present *ban* or *ti* (11):

- (10) Te souvan tu pas ban de ce Carnaval...?  
 REFL.2PS remember SCL.2PS neg well of that Carnaval  
 'Don't you remember well that Carnaval...'  
 (*Agréables Conférences*, i, l. 40; Deloffre 1999)
- (11) a. hé sçay tu pas ban que c'est le Cardena?  
 hey say SCL.2PS NEG well that it is the cardinal  
 'Hey don't you know that it is the cardinal?'  
 (Wüest 1985: 252–3)
- b. vous souvanti pas ban quan nout barbié mouti?  
 2PP remember.TI NEG well when our barber died  
 'Don't you remember when our barber died?'  
 (Wüest 1985: 252–3)

Our results in Table 12.1 show convincingly that deletion of *ne* was far more extended with these latter structures before the nineteenth century. This situation therefore raises questions: if absence or presence of *ne* in yes/no interrogatives is not constrained by phonetic weakening of *ne* as in sentential negation (triggered by affixation of the subject clitic; cf. Harris 1978 and Ashby 1981, among others), what are the constraints on the choice between these two strategies?

#### 12.4 Negation Connected to Tense, Mood, and Discursive Effects

Linguistic research on negation has shown that negation often interacts with other grammatical phenomena in revealing ways. It can indeed be connected to tense, mood, and a variety of discursive or affectedness effects related to the left periphery of the clause. Morphemes which express negation, whether they display head or non-head behaviour, are always dependent upon surrounding semantic units for their meaning. As observed above, in yes/no interrogatives within previous stages of the French language, both *ne* alone or *pas* alone have been used without the ordinary interpretation of negation. As in Portner and Zanuttini (2000), we hold the view that the markers used to express the force of negation in yes/no interrogatives and in exclamative/expressive structures are always negative. They are real negatives, and their contribution to the meaning of the sentence is hidden by certain semantic features of the context. These forms need overt checking of additional projections in the left periphery. An empirical claim for the hypothesis that informative questions and presuppositional interrogatives must be checked in a special position in the structure can be found in contemporary Quebec French—see (13) and (14) below—illustrating how dialect variation can sometimes shed light on diachronic processes, as also claimed in Benincà and Poletto (2005). Our working hypothesis is that similar strategies also existed within previous stages of the French language.

Let us suppose for ease of exposition that the context in (6a) has a Question (Q) or *wh*-operator which must have scope from a lower left peripheral position, and the domain of this operator is always to its right. When the negation marker *ne* or *pas* alone scopes in the domain of this particular operator, it lacks Negative Force. Note that the expletive interpretation of the negation markers does not change the fluctuation between the head or XP status of the negation markers. A theoretical representation of these structures is given through the general architecture of the left periphery (cf. Rizzi 1997), sketched in (12a). Studies on negation within the IP or CP domain give rise to a representation in terms of movement to different layers of the clause, as initiated by Pollock (1989) and developed by Rizzi (1997), Poletto and Pollock (2004), and many others. It is assumed that the architecture of the left periphery has a fixed component involving heads specifying Force which opens up the complementizer system and Finiteness which closes off the system downward as in (12a). The operator Neg which appears in the scope of a Question operator identified from a left peripheral position through



movement in CP of some lexical element(s) or a Remnant IP is then schematically represented as in (12b):

- (12) a. Force Top Foc *wh* Fin  
 b. [<sub>CP</sub> ... [*wh*/Q [<sub>IP</sub> ... Neg ... ]]

The co-occurrence of two different patterns or the concomitant variation in the use of either *pas* alone or *ne...pas* in yes/no interrogatives with discursive effects is therefore attributed to the existence of microvariation systems within yes/no interrogatives. The source behind this syntactic microvariation in French grammars from these periods remains unclear but the regularity observed suggests that it is connected to the semantic features involved and to a type of clause bearing discursive effects, such as presuppositional question forms and expressive structures which presuppose their content. Two constraints on these structures show the role of syntactic and semantic features, namely subject clitic inversion (SCL-I) and the presence of an explicit positive marker.

As can be observed, in Old and Middle French and in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, most yes–no interrogatives appear with SCL-I and they allow *pas* alone. In contemporary French, the modern equivalent of (6a) above (with SCL-I) is unacceptable with *pas* alone:

- (13) *Contemporary French*  
 a. *N'* est-elle *pas* belle?  
     NEG is-she NEG lovely  
     'Isn't she lovely?'  
 b. \*Est-elle *pas* belle?  
     is-she NEG lovely

Whereas the same yes/no interrogative without clitic inversion is acceptable without *ne*: *Elle est pas belle?* or with *ne*: *Elle n'est pas belle?* Similar facts with SCL-I interrogative forms in contemporary Veneto dialects have also been found. Benincà and Poletto (2005) have observed that in one dialect (Paduan), the preverbal negation marker is optional, whereas in the S. Anna dialect the presence of the preverbal marker is rather ruled out.

Why has contemporary French developed this constraint on SCL-I and the presence of *ne*? We do not consider that the obligatory presence of *ne* is linked to the more formal style of the SCL-I in contemporary French. We rather assume that some parameter changes, connected to verb movement and rise of SV word order in interrogatives, must be implied. Similar facts have been observed in imperatives by Hirschbühler and Labelle (2001)

who show that, with the pronouns *en* and *y*, *ne* is obligatory in negative imperatives if these pronouns are preverbal: *N'en mange pas* / \**En mange pas*. ('Do not eat it').

On the contrary, some forms, which are never used in a more formal register, are impossible with the head *ne*, as in colloquial expressive structures with an emphatic affirmative operator *-tu* (Vinet 2000, forthcoming) in contemporary expressive structures from QF:

- (14) *Fak là, il (\* ne) part-tu pas à crier*  
 suddenly he NEG starts-TU PAS yelling  
 'Suddenly, he starts yelling'

Moreover, it can be observed in (15*b*) that *pas* is completely ruled out in informative questions with the enclitic interrogative marker *-tu* in contemporary QF (cf. Vinet 2000, 2001). The marker *-tu*, which can appear in various other discursive contexts in the grammar of QF, has been identified as a super positive or an affirmative marker in Vinet (2000, forthcoming). The question form becomes acceptable only when an irrealis mood (like a conditional) turns it into a presuppositional interrogative form, as illustrated in (15*c*). The negation marker *pas* is obligatorily absent in informative questions—cf. (15*b*). This last sentence is interpreted as gibberish in QF:

- (15) *a. Ta mère est-tu là?* (QF: Inf. question)  
 your mother is-TU there  
 'Is your mother in?'  
*b. \*Ta mère est-tu pas là?* (QF: Inf. question)  
 your mother is-TU PAS there  
 'Is your mother in?'  
*c. Ta mère serait-tu pas là*  
 your mother should be-TU PAS there  
 (par hasard)? (QF: Presup. question)  
 by chance  
 'Isn't your mother in by any chance?'

In a certain way, the positive marker *-tu* in contemporary QF plays a role which is similar to the positive reinforcers *ban* (well), as exemplified in (10, 11), or *-ti* in (16), in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

- (16) *a. Seventeenth-century French*  
 He la vela *ti pas*, la vela *ti pas*  
 Ho 3PFS there TI NEG 3PFS there TI NEG

'Ho! There it is, there it is!'

(*Journal de Jean Héroard*: 1604; Foisil 1989)

b. *Eighteenth-century French*

C'est-il pas-là comme le Pape

'isn't it somewhat like the Pope?'

(*Les Sarcellades*, from Lodge's computerized corpus)

As is well known (cf. Pollock 1989; Laka 1990), affirmative particles cannot co-occur with negative markers unless these markers lack a negative interpretation. This is exactly the situation observed in (10), (11), and (16) where *pas* lacks its negative value (or in QF: *vla tu pas qu'elle se met à pleurer*). Just as for SCL-I and yes/no interrogatives, is there a free alternation between *ne* and *ne...pas* in these structures in older stages of French? Our data for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show prevalence of absence of *ne*, but presence of *ne* is not forbidden, as shown in (17):

(17) *Ne vlati pas la taye a cu*

'Isn't there the...'

(*Agréables Conférences*, from Lodge's computerized corpus)

More research should be done on the exact role of *ban* and *-ti* in older stages of French as well as their relation to the negative marker *ne*.

## 12.5 Conclusion

An understanding of the role played by phonological, syntactic, and semantic factors in the way French negative markers could combine can shed light on their evolution. Our findings suggest that different realizations of negation within the IP/CP domain, as well as within various registers of speech, could have developed in partly independent ways in diachronic grammars.

We have observed, for instance, that before the nineteenth century, many occurrences of preverbal negation were not present in yes/no interrogatives and this difference was not connected to a distinction between formal and non-formal registers. Recall that sequences as in (6a) are not possible in contemporary varieties of colloquial French. Remaining questions obviously concern (1) the exact motivation behind the concurrent use of both *pas* alone and *ne...pas* over a long period with these structures, and (2) the evolution of negation in the left periphery. To our knowledge, no attempt has been made to answer why these two different strategies were used concomitantly.

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