

# Studying Colloquial French Subject Clitics Using Corpus Data: Morphological Perspective

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## Introduction

Among the Romance Languages, French appears to stand apart when it comes to the matter of subject clitic pronouns. French seems to be the only language of the family classified as a non-null-subject language. Languages such as Italian, Spanish and Portuguese are able to omit their subject pronouns while French cannot. It holds on to a full paradigm of subject clitics (*je, tu, il/elle, etc.*) which are obligatory except when a fully referential nominal fills the subject position (Heap, Oliuéri and Palasis 2017).

The question many have debated is whether French subject clitics are best analyzed from a morphological viewpoint or a syntactic one (Culbertson 2014). Proponents of a morphological analysis (Culbertson 2010; Culbertson and Legendre 2014; Palasis 2015) have suggested that rather than independent syntactic entities, subject clitics in French behave as agreement markers on verbs. (Culbertson 2014) Furthermore, the difference between French and Colloquial (Continental) French sheds a whole new light on the status of Colloquial French in the context of the Null-Subject Parameter.

## Background

a. Elle chante et (elle) danse.  
She sings.3SG and (she) dances.3SG  
'She sings and (she) dances.' (St. Fr.)

b. Elle chante et \*(elle) danse.  
She sings.3SG and \*(she) dances.3SG

'She sings and dances.' (Coll. Fr.)  
c. Jean, il n'a rien dit.  
Jean, he has.3SG nothing said.PST-PTCP  
'Jean, he said nothing.' (St.Fr.)

d. Jean/Lui il a rien dit.  
Jean/him he has.3SG nothing said.PST-PTCP  
'Jean/him he said nothing.' (Coll. Fr.)

e. Ecoute-t- il?  
Hear.3SG he?  
'Does he hear?' (St. Fr.)

f. Il écoute?  
He hears.3SG ?  
'Does he hear?' (Coll. Fr.)

| French                           | Italian  | Spanish  | Portuguese |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------|------------|
| Je parle [paʁl] Parlo            | Parlo    | Hablo    | Falo       |
| Tu parles [paʁl] Parli           | Parli    | Hablas   | Falas      |
| Il/Elle parle [paʁl] Parla       | Parla    | Habla    | Fala       |
| On parle [paʁl] Parliamo         | Parliamo | Hablamos | Falamos    |
| Vous parlez [paʁl] Parlate       | Parlate  | Habláis  | Falais     |
| Ils/elles parlent [paʁl] Parlano | Parlano  | Hablan   | Falam      |

While, French shows inflectional morphology in the written language, verbs are not phonologically distinct ( except 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural).

| Criterion                                       | Test                           |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Clitic is Obligatory                            | α: Coordination<br>β: Doubling |
| Fixed preverbal position                        | γ: Interrogation               |
| No intervening elements between clitic and verb | δ: Negation                    |

Criteria for what define a Null Subject Language come from studies of Northern Italian Dialects. While Standard French doesn't meet these criteria, Colloquial French does.

g. Tu ne le lui as pas dit.  
You NEG it.to.him have.2SG not said.PST-PTCP  
'You did not say it to him.' (St. Fr.)

h. Tu le lui as pas dit.  
You it to.him have.2SG not said.PST-PTCP  
'You did not say it to him.' (Coll. Fr.)

## Corpora

Two Corpora

- Phonologie du Français Contemporain (PFC)
- Enquêtes Sociolinguistiques à Orléans (ESLO)

Naturalistic Data

- Data came from interviews, radio, and other colloquial settings.
- I filtered out constructions with DPs and Pronouns to calculate the ratios of Il-dropped constructions.
- I binned verbs based on their frequencies in the corpora.

## Results

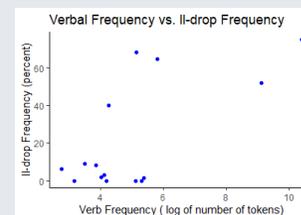
According to Culbertson and Legendre (2014), the pronoun *il* can be dropped within certain verbal environments, with frequently used verbs, and with non-referential verbs.

| Construction                          | Type        | Frequency | Number of Tokens | Percent il-drop |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|------------------|-----------------|
| Il y a DP-def                         | Existential | High      | 25,026/33,241    | 75.5%           |
| Il faut (que/V <sub>inf</sub> )       | Modal       | High      | 4752/9116        | 52.1%           |
| Il fait beau                          | Weather     | High      | 223/334          | 64.8%           |
| Il arrive de V <sub>inf</sub>         | Non-Modal   | Mid       | 3/218            | 1.4%            |
| Il semble que DP                      | Non-Modal   | Mid       | 0/202            | 0%              |
| Il vaut mieux (que/V <sub>inf</sub> ) | Modal       | Mid       | 117/171          | 68.4%           |
| Il reste DP-def / V <sub>inf</sub>    | Existential | Mid       | 0/170            | 0%              |

Culbertson and Legendre (2014) introduce 4 verbal categories: Modal, Non-Modal, Existential and Weather.

| Construction                        | Type        | Frequency | Number of Tokens | Percent il-drop |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|------------------|-----------------|
| Il paraît que DP                    | Non-Modal   | Low       | 29/72            | 40.3%           |
| Il se trouve que DP                 | Non-Modal   | Low       | 0/66             | 0%              |
| Il pleut                            | Weather     | Low       | 2/62             | 3.2%            |
| Il s'agit de (DP/V <sub>inf</sub> ) | Non-Modal   | Low       | 1/56             | 1.8%            |
| Il suffit de V <sub>inf</sub>       | Non-Modal   | Low       | 4/48             | 8.3%            |
| Il est possible que DP              | Modal       | Low       | 3/33             | 9%              |
| Il reste à V <sub>inf</sub>         | Existential | Low       | 0/32             | 0%              |
| Il fait froid                       | Weather     | Low       | 0/24             | 0%              |
| Il est clair que DP                 | Modal       | Low       | 1/16             | 6.25%           |

## Analysis



There is statistically significant correlation between the frequency of the verb (as found in the corpora) and the frequency of the dropped pronoun  $r = 0.58, p = 0.023$

- Under the grammaticalization framework, clitics evolve from lexical items and continue to become affixes (Hopper and Traugott 2003).

### Lexical Item > Clitic > Affix

- If we assume, such as in Rizzi (1986), that French clitics are more like agreement markers/affixes, then Modern French is more like a Null Subject language than a Partial Null Subject language.

Is there a hierarchy of factors that lead to pronoun dropping?

- Frequency of the verb/construction seems to be the primary predictive factor.
- Culbertson and Legendre's (2014) data suggests that modals were rated the highest for acceptability of il-drop, while weather constructions were rated the least acceptable for il-drop. The data in the corpora don't support this.
- Phonological reduction may lead to il-dropping (in certain non-referential/expletive constructions).

It is unclear whether Old French (OF) was a Null Subject Language or not

- Syntactically, Null Subjects are more likely to be found in embedded clauses than root clauses (Zimmerman 2018).
- Overt subjects in Impersonal Constructions in OF are consistent with Non-Null Subject Languages like Modern French.
- OF may be a partial Null Subject Language (See Roberts and Holmberg 2010 for criteria).
  - Criteria 3: Generic pronouns can and must be null (Roberts and Holmberg 2014).
  - Criteria 4: Predicates which do not have theta marked subjects generally have no overt subjects (Holmberg et al. 2009).

## Conclusion

- French is the only Romance Language that is a Non-Null-Subject Language.
- Considering both diachronic and synchronic evidence, Colloquial French may be undergoing a change in its pronominal system.
- The data suggests that:
  - The more frequent a verb is, the more likely to allow for pronoun dropping.
  - If the pronoun is not referential, it is more likely that the pronoun will be dropped.
- While there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that French may be transitioning to a NSL, the corporal data support Culbertson and Legendre's 2014 claims that verbal frequency and environment make il-dropping available to speakers.

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