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, Oliviéri and Palasis, 2017).

The question many have debated is whether French subject clitics are best analyzed from a morphological viewpoint or a syntactic one (Culberston 2014). Proponents of a morphological analysis (Culberston, 2010; Culberston and Legendre, 2014; Palasis, 2015) have suggested that rather than independent syntactic entities, subject clitics in French behave as agreement markers on verbs. (Culberston, 2014)

Furthermore, the difference between French and Colloquial (Continental) French sheds a whole new light on the status of Colloquial French as a proposed Null-Subject Language (Culberston, 2014).

This paper aims to build on the research outlined above, in particular that of Culberston and Legendre (2014), which proposes that certain cases of the pronoun, il (3rd sg. masc.) can be dropped when the subject is non-referential and under certain verbal environments: Epistemic/Non-epistemic modals (1)a, Weather (1)b, Non-modals (1)c, and Impersonal/Existential (1)d.

(1) a. il faut que... > Ø faut que...
   3SG required that
   ‘It is required that…’

   b. il fait beau > Ø fait beau
   3SG makes beautiful
   ‘It’s nice’

   c. il semble/s’agit que... > Ø semble/s’agit que...
   3SG seems/be a question of that
   ‘It seems/is a question of…’

   d. il reste DP_{def} > Ø reste DP_{def}
   3SG remains DP_{def}
   ‘There remains DP_{def}

There exist phenomena in the literature that point to pronoun dropping in Colloquial French: (1) Morpho-phonological factors such as fusion of the subject clitic and its verb (je sais
This study uses an analysis of corpus data from the *Phonologie du Français Contemporain* (PFC) and the *Enquêtes Sociolinguistiques à Orléans* (ESLO), which support the observations made by Culberston and Legendre (2014), which suggests that Colloquial French may be undergoing a change towards a Null-Subject language. I narrow my search to naturalistic utterances, filter phrases using the pronoun, *il*, and calculate the proportion of phrases where the pronoun is dropped. My results point to a potential hierarchy of morphophonological (cliticization) and lexical (frequency and verbal category) factors that support Culberston and Legendre’s (2014) grammaticality test results. Furthermore, this study attempts at using these data and observations made in previous studies to see if other subject clitics may also be dropped.

References


