

When is preverbal negation reanalysed as a polarity marker?

The case of French *ne*

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Sentential negation marking evolve in many languages following a cycle (Larrivée and Ingham in press, van Gelderen 2011, Breitbarth, Lucas and Willis 2010), where a preverbal marker is adjoined with a postverbal item that ends up as the sole expression of the category. The fact that the intermediate stage conjoins two markers poses the well-known challenge of negative concord. Two items are used to convey a single notion, in contradistinction to the assumption that cancellation should obtain from the clausemate use of two negatives. One long-standing way to resolve this paradox has been to deny negative status to the 'extra' marker(s). This strategy is adopted by Breitbarth in her analysis of the negative cycle in Germanic (2009). She claims that the acquisition of negative status by the postverbal item turns the preverbal item into a polarity marker, leaving only one negative standing at any stage. The purpose of this paper is to assess whether the predictions made by this analysis are supported by the history of French negation. More specifically, the analysis would predict that preverbal *ne* becomes a polarity marker at least from the 18th century, when the postverbal items *pas* and *point* are incontrovertly negative (as demonstrated by uses as constituent negative, in fragment answers and with a double negation readings). Following Breitbarth and Haegeman (2010), such a reanalysis would lead to expect a tangible shift away from negative contexts; for French, a dramatic decrease in the rate of sentential negation introduced by *ne* alone should be found, as should be an increase of non-negative, 'expletive' uses. The respective weight of these uses is therefore what this paper presents. It looks at the proportion of negative uses of *ne* alone and of expletive uses in corpora reflecting more vernacular styles (Textes français privés des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, some of the texts used by Martineau and Mougeon 2003 to chart *ne*-absence, and for the contemporary period the Corpus de français parlé parisien des années 2000 as compared with the Corpus de français parlé au Québec), in the hope of getting closer to the immediate competence of speakers. The preliminary results indicate that the expletive uses are non-existent in the contemporary vernacular, and that the negative uses are stable at about 1%, against the predictions by Breitbarth. This suggests that dual reanalysis does not follow from the emergence of two markers at an intermediate stage of the Jespersen cycle, and that two negative markers are a perfectly respectable grammatical state of affairs.

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