

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

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## 0. Résumé

## 0. Abstract

## 1. Introduction

Sentential negation marking evolves in many languages following a cycle (Larrivée and Ingham 2011, van Gelderen 2011, Breitbarth, Lucas and Willis 2010), where a preverbal marker is adjoined with a post-verbal item that survives as the sole negator. 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  | NEG |                  |
|     | I don't say |     |      |     |                  |
| (2) | Je          | ne  | dis  | pas | (French)         |
|     | 1PS-NOM     | NEG | say  | NEG |                  |
|     | I don't say |     |      |     |                  |

poses the well-known challenge of negative concord (i.a. Giannakidou 2000). 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' concurring 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. 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 it introduces on its own and an explosion in the percentages of non-negative readings allegedly comprising exceptive and expletive ones. The respective weight of these uses is therefore what this paper investigates. It establishes their quantitative profile in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 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 immediate competence of speakers where the reanalysis initially takes place. The results show the expletive uses to become non-existent in the contemporary vernacular, and 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 perfectly respectable grammatical state of affairs.

## 2. Reanalyses

Clausal negatives in some language come in pairs. A preverbal item may be subsequently adjoined 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 (van 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 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 Anne Breitbart (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 reanalyzed as a PolP head whose polarity is not specified.” (van Gelderen 2011: 295). Thus, if the preverbal element is reanalysed as polarity marker due to the post-verbal item being understood as full-blown negatives, it is liable to decline quickly since it lies outside the grammar of negation that it has just left. Of those languages such as Dutch where no quick decline is observed, it is proposed that the post-verbal item has taken longer to be reanalysed as the negative that the preverbal clitic remains. The model is that of a dual reanalysis both of the preverbal and of the post-verbal item at the moment of grammatical change. It captures the point that the same formal structure NEG V NEG is ambiguous between an initial stage where NEG V is the default negative sometimes adjoined with a post-verbal reinforcement, and a later stage where V NEG is the default case with an occasional preverbal element, although a period of real concord between two full negatives is excluded. Thus, the reanalysis is the cause of the decline of the preverbal element, not its phonetic reduction, or structural redundancy with the post-verbal item. These post-verbal items are reinterpreted as negatives because they can be. The process is neither the pull chain envisaged by Jespersen, where the weakness of the preverbal calls for post-verbal elements, nor a push chain as such, where the post-verbal item becoming the standard negative makes the preverbal redundant, but a hybrid approach, where the reinterpretation of each from negative to polarity and from polarity to negative is concomitant. There are therefore never really two markers of negation, as one of them is always only a polarity element, solving the compositionality puzzle.

How should we know whether we are dealing with a polarity element or a negative, one could ask. We are when there emerge non-negative uses in contexts other than negation and negative concord. Cases in point are exceptive and expletive uses said to develop in the critical periods change and beyond. Let us consider these in turn. An exceptive is a use where a focused phrase introduced by a specific marker follows a formally negated sequence from the influence of which it is exempt. This can be illustrated by French and contemporary Japanese (the example below is from Alonso-Ovalle and Hirotani 2004):

- (3) Il n’a rencontré que Bart  
 3SG *ne* have met EXCEPTIVE Bart  
 He met nobody but Bart.
- (4) John-ga Bart-sika awa-nagat-ta  
 John-NOM Bart-EXCEPTIVE meet-NEG-PAST  
 John met nobody but Bart.

The argument is that exceptive configurations initially with dual negation in the West Germanic languages studied by Breitbarth are later marked by the sole preverbal marker, and survive well after the preverbal marker can express negation on its own, supporting the view that it conveys not negation, but polarity. Whether negative value is absent from such constructions is debatable. The argument that they do not license negative polarity items as negative markers is patently non-factual: while it has a literary ring, French *Il n'étudie quoi que ce soit qu'avant l'examen* 'He doesn't study anything except before exams' is a perfectly good case of NPI *quoi que ce soit* 'anything' licensed by the preverbal element. Also note that *que* is in contemporary French vernacular often directly licensed by *rien* (*J'ai dormi rien que deux heures* 1S-NOM have slept nothing *que-EXCEPTIVE* two hours 'I slept only two hours'), whose negative value is difficult to deny. The reanalysis argument would imply that the further construction *She is nothing if not accomplished* does not involve a negative in the conditional, but without a negative, there would be no double negation and thus no exceptive reading, which of course is the very point of these constructions. While some amount of conventionalisation is certainly involved with exceptives, that they involve no negation is a contentious position.

Less contentious is the status of the expletive use. Well attested cross-linguistically (Horn 2010 and references therein), expletive are negatives markers that are commanded by an inherently negative element (*fear, deny, doubt*, comparatives of inequality, some correlatives) and do not have negative interpretation. That such uses are taken on in an increasingly greater variety of contexts by the preverbal marker in West Flemish (as observed by Breitbarth and Haegeman 2010) supports the view that the marker has become a polarity element, although no quantitative data is actually provided. I add two caveats however: this view would entail that other negative markers can be polarity elements as well, since they can be attested in the expected contexts with an expletive reading (Horn 2010, Larrivée 1996), which might not be a desirable conclusion. The analysis of expletive uses themselves is not unambiguous, and at least one credible proposal developed by Muller (1991) proposes that the items commanding an expletive all suggest a negation of the subordinate, as with *I fear that P* which can be paraphrased by *I hope that not P*, which points to an 'inverse concord' analysis (Larrivée 2004: section 3.6).

The argument is therefore that the decline of the preverbal negative marker in West Germanic languages follows from its reanalysis as a polarity element that is manifested by increasing non-negative uses. I note that the connection between reanalysis and decline would require elucidation, as surely there is no reason why the item could not be stable in its new function. Leaving this to one side, the dual reanalysis hypothesis has sufficient interest and clarity to warrant an assessment of its predictions. That is what the next sections do.

### 3. Research questions

The approach developed by Breitbarth on the dual reanalysis of clausal negatives in West Germanic languages makes three predictions.

- .Preverbal negatives can be reanalysed as polarity elements;
- .This reanalysis is established by increasing uses in non-negative environments such as exceptive and expletive;
- .The reanalysis is caused by post-verbal polarity elements becoming negatives.

It is the second prediction that I want to test here. The first prediction as to the possibility of reanalysis into a polarity item is plausible enough not to trouble anyone too much at this stage. The reality of the third prediction is both more difficult to test until criteria of negativity are provided (although these can be found, in constituent negation, fragment answers and double negation, as in Larrivée 2011), and is clearly dependent on the second prediction. The later rests on clear criteria that make it immediately amenable to empirical verification. The expectation is that as the preverbal item starts to decline as the default negative, an increasing proportion of its uses will be found in non-negative environments.

The second prediction is tested on French. A language with a well-documented history, French has clausal negatives that evolve as in the languages on which Breitbarth builds her general analysis. What we know about French preverbal *ne* is that following *non* in archaic French, it is the Old French default negative. Adjoined early on by post-verbal elements, it starts being

omitted at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in vernacular styles (Martineau 2011) and is currently used at rates of less than 5 percent in the vernacular styles (for an overview, see van Compernelle 2009). What we suspect is that *ne*'s change of status cannot be blamed on either phonetic dimensions, as there is no evidence that it ever was very substantial, or post-verbal reinforcement, which appear well before *ne* starts being dropped, some reinforcements inducing drop and some others not at all (Ingham 2011). What is not clear is when the default negative status ends for *ne*, what the profile of exceptive and expletive uses is, partly because of a dearth of quantitative studies, partly because the work has been done mostly on literary material, a specialised language practice that might reveal little of the actual history of a language. Investigation of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century travelogues (Chen 2010: 113ff) suggest that *ne* as the sole negative crashes from 89% around 1610 and 67% in 1619 to a third of clausal negation marking in 1627 to less than 10% from the 1630, a rate at which it is stable until the end of the century. The subsequent centuries should therefore provide us with the dramatic change in non-negative uses that Breitbarth's analysis is predicting.

The general research question I pursue is whether French provides evidence for the reanalysis of *ne* as a polarity marker. The rates of uses of *ne* as a sole negator, with an exceptive and in expletive environments constitute the particular points of interest. How this is approached is described in the next section.

#### 4. Method and corpus

The prediction that the accession of the post-verbal markers to negative status leads the preverbal element to be reanalysed as a polarity marker as demonstrated by its increasing use in non-negative contexts is tested with reference to the situation in French, which has a preverbal clitic that has been in decline for the last few hundred years. The selected body of data on which this is tested is the corpus assembled by Gerhard Ernst and Barbara Wolf. The *Textes français privés des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* offers a set of private diaries from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. This seems to cover the right period, that witnesses the emergence of the marked status of negation expressed by *ne* on its own and the beginning of its omission. The register of these texts is more likely to evidence directly the patterns of grammatical evolution, as with *ne*-drop that first occurs in vernacular practices. The degree to which each diary is private, and equally vernacular, remains to be fully assessed, and collectively they put us in a better position than literary material to answer the questions of the evolution of *ne*.

The occurrences of *ne* were therefore searched for in the whole corpus. All diaries provided 1050 occurrences of *ne*, and three texts with about at least 100 occurrences were chosen at the beginning, middle and end of the period covered. This selection made it possible to examine each case individually and they were classified according to their use. The uses of *ne* come in four varieties. Two straightforwardly have to do with negation, one in which it is the exclusive marker of clausal negation (*Je ne sais* 1S-NOM NEG know 'I don't know'), the other where it is used with another negative (*Je ne sais pas* 1S-NOM NEG know NEG). Two more uses are those described as non-negative, the use with the exceptive *que* (*Je ne le sais que trop* 1S-NOM NEG IT-ACC know que-EXCEPTIVE too-much 'I know it only too well'), and the expletive use where *salva veritate* no negative meaning is communicated in a variety of subordinate environments commanded by an expressions of e.g. fear, doubt, forbidding or comparison (*Je crains qu'il ne vienne* 1S-NOM fear that 3PS-NOM *ne* comes 'I'm afraid he might come'). The last two readings are those that are expected to spectacularly rise by the end of the period if a reanalysis has taken place of *ne* as polarity element. The classification of uses of *ne* in three private diaries at the beginning, middle and end of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries period is presented in table 1.

<i>ne</i>	Negative	Concording	Exceptive	Expletive	Totals
Durand (1610-1624)	44	44	8	1	97
	45%	45%	8%	1%	
Dusson (1658-1685)	49	117	56	9	231
	21%	50.6%	24.2%	3.8%	
Ménétra (1764-	39	247	38	9	333

1802)					
	11,7%	74.2%	11.4%	2.7%	

**Table 1. Rates of the uses of *ne* in three diaries of the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

The general progression of uses in this sub-part of the corpus is clear and follows what we know about the history of French. There is a growth of non-negative uses, although a modest one from the beginning to the end of the period, from 8% to 11.4% for exceptives, and from 1% to 2.7% for expletives. It must be noted that the rate of expletive *ne* in Ménétra is probably a little higher than would be expected, due to the over-representation of the sequence *craindre que* ‘fear that’ where 7 of the 9 expletives are found. In other words, it might be that this is a fixed form for that particular author, that tells us little about the status of *ne* in their grammar. An adjustment of that figure would yield a stable rate of expletives between the beginning and end of the period. This draws attention to the situation of the intermediate Dusson diaries, where non negative uses have a higher proportion than would be expected, which may be explained either by a period of unresolved change or by authors preference, something that calls for further examination. What the examination of the data clearly show is that there is a clear rearrangement going on within *negative* uses: negative *ne* is clearly declining, from half the occurrences of *ne* in 1610-1624 to 11.7% at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; I note that this use might be overrepresented in the Dusson diaries due to a frequent use of *ne* with *savoir*. The second clear pattern is the diversification of concord relations with *ne*, as shown in the following table by the number of occurrences of other negatives with which *ne* is used.

<i>ne</i>	<i>ne</i> negative	<i>pas</i>	<i>point</i>	<i>plus</i> and <i>jamais</i>	n-words	totals negative and concord
Durand	44	14	18	6	3	88
	50%	15.9%	20.5%	0.7%	3.4%	
Dusson	49	86	11	2	8	166
	29.5%	47%	6.7%	1.2%	4.8%	
Ménétra	39	102	54	46	32	286
	11.7%	35.7%	18.9%	16%	12.6%	

**Table 2. Rates of the uses of *ne* with other negatives in three diaries of the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

The percentages clearly show how on the one hand, *pas* wins out the competition with *point* as the main clausal post-verbal negator, and on the other hand, how n-words acquire quantitative significance. The first fact is well-known, although much more needs to be known about the conditions of actuation of the change; the second is novel, and suggests that in effect n-words remain a much less frequent way to negate a clause at least in the vernacular before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the patterns emerging from the quantitative data do seem convergent with what is known about the history of French negation, it cannot be excluded that a limited number of sources provide an inaccurate picture of the actual situation. This called for data from more sources to be provided, which was done by looking at the elided incarnation of *ne* before a vowel. The search for elided *ne* in the corpus yielded a total of 450 occurrences. The classification of each yielded the quantitative results provided in the following table.

n'	Negative	Concording	Exceptive	Expletive	Liaison	Totals
Valuche (1607-1662)	0	1	1	1		3
Durand (1610-1624)	5	17	4	2	3	31
Famille Goyard (1611-1763)	3	1	1	0	0	5

Famille Dusson (1658– 1685)	1	1	0	0	1	3
Chavatte (1657-1693)	38	167	27	9	47	288
17 <sup>th</sup>	47	187	33	12	51	330
	14.2%	56.7%	10%	3.6%	15.5%	
Reveillaud (1696-1745)	0	1	1	0	1	3
Girard (1722- 1725)	0	8	5	0	0	13
Montjean (1774-1775)	2	88	13	1	0	104
18 <sup>th</sup>	2	97	19	1	1	120
	1.7%	80.1%	15.8%	0.8%	0.8%	

**Table 3. Rates of the uses of elided *ne* in the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

The table presents us with a new category, not found with graphically autonomous *ne*, which is that of liaison. Elided *ne* is found before a vowel and after clitics *on* one-NOM and *en* of-it where it communicates no negative value at all, but represents an underlying consonant *n* deriving from nasal vowel of the preceding clitic to avoid two consecutive vowels – a fact still often making it impossible to decide whether after *on* a negative marker or simply liaison is involved in contemporary oral recordings (i.a. Meisenberg 2004). While this could be seen as a trace of reanalysis of negative *ne*, this cannot be the right perspective given the fact that it occurs in phonologically determined contexts, and only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, telling us about the partial mastery of orthographical conventions even by writers from a fairly established social background before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The other categories evolve in ways that confirm the previously observed tendencies, and more dramatically so. There is a modest rise of non-negative contexts when considered together, from 13.6% to 16.6%; if we remove the liaison cases that are not negative at all, we get stability, from 16.1% to 16.8%. Those number cover different evolutions for the exceptive, which is slightly rising, and the expletive, which is falling. Either use does not undergo the expected dramatic explosion. The dramatic change is found in the fall of *ne* as the sole exponent of negation, from 14.2% (16.8% without liaison) to 1.7% (or 1.68% without the one case of liaison), a lower rate than with unelided *ne* across the board. As for the diversification of negatives with which *ne* is used, it is partially attested in the more extent diaries of Chavatte and Montjean.

<i>n'</i>	<i>ne</i> negative	<i>pas</i>	<i>point</i>	<i>plus</i> and <i>jamais</i>	n-words	totals negative and concord
Chavatte	38	107	14	18	25	205
	18.5%	52.1%	6.8%	8.7%	12.2%	
Montjean	2	66	1	11	7	90
	2.2%	73.3%	1.1%	12.2%	7.7%	

**Table 4. Rates of uses of elided *ne* with other negatives in two diaries of the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

Figures in table 4 confirm the decline of *point* and the dominant position assumed by *pas* as main clausal negator; what is not confirmed is the emergence of n-words with *ne*, which was well-established in the Chavatte diary from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Solid quantitative results from vernacular texts during critical 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century do not evidence any of the expected spectacular growth of non-negative readings of *ne*, and do not therefore support the dual reanalysis hypothesis. Before giving up on the hypothesis, it is worth having one last look at yet another orthographic variant of the preverbal marker. *Ne* is found to be written fused with vowel-initial verbs in a significant number of instances. These instances were looked at and classified in the whole corpus (we have left to one side for expediency

reasons the rather numerous instances of fusion with ‘to be’ *nestoit* and *nest*, with ‘have’ *na* and *nont*, and with partitive and locative clitics *nen* and *ny*). Results are as follows.

Fused <i>n-</i>	negative	concording	exceptive	expletive	liaison	
	62	357	75	9	40	543
	11.4%	65.7%	13.1%	1.7%	7.4%	

**Table 5. Rates of uses of fused *ne* in the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

It might have been the case that fused *n* could have indicated reanalysis as a polarity particle. It however is not. The rates are comparable to those obtained with elided *n'* across the whole corpus

Elided <i>ne</i>	negative	concording	exceptive	expletive	liaison	
	49	184	52	13	52	450
	14.1%	63.1%	11.5%	2.9%	11.6%	

**Table 6. Rates of uses of elided *ne* in the *Ernst & Wolf* corpus**

or with the aggregated rates of unelided *ne*, standing at 19% negative, 62% concording, 15% exceptive and 2.9% expletive. These aggregate rates make for instructive comparison with rates of use in contemporary vernacular French as captured by the *Corpus de français parlé parisien des années 2000*. The examination of the first 300 occurrences of unelided *ne* in complete utterances yields the results reported in table 7.

<i>ne</i>	Negative	Concording	Exceptive	Expletive	
CFPP	4	276	20	0	300
	1.3%	92%	6.7%	0%	

**Table 7. Rates of uses of *ne* in contemporary vernacular French**

These rates once again confirm the tendencies observed in the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century period: the extinction of expletive readings, a sharp decline of the negative reading, a decline of the exceptive, and a rise of use with other clause-mate negatives. The significance of the results described in this section is spelled put in the conclusive discussion that follows.

## 5. Conclusive discussion

The purpose of this paper is to verify the claims made by Breitbarth (2009) on the basis of West Germanic languages that the accession of post-verbal element to negator status causes the reanalysis of the preverbal negative as a polarity marker, that would then start occurring in non-negative environments before disappearing altogether. These claims are not supported by the situation in the French vernacular. The main empirical results are as follows:

.the **expletive** reading of *ne*, the rates of which should explode if it has become a polarity marker, hover between 1 and 3%, depending on authors and orthographic variant more than period. The corpus confirms that *ne* is not the only negative with expletive readings, as the following taken from the corpus shows:

- (5) Messieurs de la ville de poligny firent pouze un banc [...] qu'est le premier que lon **n'ay jamais** pose [...] (Durand, 12v)

The Poligny city people had a bench placed that was the first that was ever put there

- (6) elle fut emportè du dit lieu **sans jamais plus n'entendre** parl ne scavoir la ou elle estoit (Chavatte, 1678, 267v)

It was taken away without one ever hearing again or knowing where it was

The expletive reading is not attested in the contemporary vernacular.

.the **exceptive** use is relatively stable, at about 14% in the earlier period, with no clear trend of evolution. It declines at about 6% in the contemporary period.

.the **negative** reading of *ne* comes to be a minority option from 1610, in line with evidence from Chen (2011). It declines from about 13% on average in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to 2% in the 18<sup>th</sup>, to the current rate of 1% that is also found by Pouder (2011)

.the use **with other negatives** grows in proportion, from about half of the uses in the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to a three quarters in the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> to over 90% today. This growth may be accompanied by a more diverse set of n-words used with *ne*, although this may be dependent on individual authors. *Pas* establishes itself as the main clausal negator against *point* probably by the 1650's, with some author variation (as with Ménétra).

.a **liaison** use is found for elided and fused orthographic variants of *ne* that attest of limited mastery of orthographic codes by even fairly well-off individuals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

The diachronic evidence points to preverbal clitic *ne* having become an agreement marker, as proposed by Kayne (1983) or Milner (1979). Agreement takes place with other negatives with which *ne* is increasingly used. In fact, negatives that have the same clausal scope must agree with *ne*, and there are no known examples where *ne* would introduce double negation with *pas* 'not' or *personne* 'nobody': *Il ne voit personne* never means 'He doesn't see no one' implying 'He does see someone', unlike with *pas* that would primarily convey double negation. The clausal scope that *ne* marks serves as a background to the use of exceptive *que*, that still behaves as a polarity item (Dekydspter 1993). This suggests that *ne* is a full-blown negative, as does its use as the sole negative marker. Indeed, *ne* can introduce focus effects (*Il ne peut travailler rapidement* 'He can't work quickly') and double negative readings with constituent negatives (*Je ne peux travailler pour rien* 'I can't work for nothing', 'If I am to work, it has to be for something'). *Ne* being a full-blown negative suggests that we are dealing with an agreement relation between several real negated, that can technically be dealt with by absorption mechanisms (i.a. de Swart 2010). That approach avoids the inaccurate predictions made by approaches that deny negative status to *ne*, which have to resort to stipulations to account for its use as a sole negator, and with the exceptive, by saying that negation is introduced by a covert operator for instance.

The agreement behaviour of *ne* relates, I propose, to the general evolution of clitics in French. It has been proposed for some time that argumental clitics have become agreement markers ensuring the relation between the argument and the verbal predicate (see Culberston and Legendre 2008 for an overview). There is another respect in which the clitic status of *ne* is relevant to its evolution, and it is in explaining its obsolescence. If the decline of the preverbal marker isn't explained by reanalysis as a polarity marker, and if phonetic or functional redundancy do not help, then what? A suggestion from Posner (1985: 188) is cited by Breitbarth (2009: 85-86) that has to do with the clitic clustering. Posner notes that while *ne* is no more substantial than many of its romance counterparts, it finds itself in a cluster of clitics that tend to be reduced: *je ne le lui ai pas donné* I-1S-NOM NEG 3S-ACC 3S-DAT have NEG given 'I haven't given it to him' can often be produced as [zjepadone], with four clitics reduced to two phonemes. Clitic reduction may thus lead to obsolescence of preverbal negative marking. This idea is confirmed by the data provided Culberston and Legendre (2008), which argue that it is mostly with a clitic subject that *ne* is not realised, and is found mostly with a lexical subject. They cite 17% of *ne*-drop with a lexical subject and 94% with a clitic subject in spontaneous oral speech. Clitic cluster reduction seems the cause of the obsolescence of the preverbal negative in French. This would be well worth pursuing in the history of French, and that of West Germanic and other languages where preverbal negation decline is noted.

The upshot is that decline of a negative in the Jespersen cycle by no means necessarily entails its reanalysis, a reanalysis hypothesis for which the history French provides no support. An approach where the negative value of each item stands in an agreement relation avoid stipulational mechanisms where the negative uses of each have to be explained away. The decline of the preverbal item appears to be related to its membership of a regularly reduced clitic cluster



in French, and whether cliticisation makes clausal negatives more liable to obsolescence is a question well worth pursuing by future research.

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