

## Synchronic variation in French negation

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This contribution is concerned with the variable omission of the French negation particle *ne*. French negation can be expressed pre- and post-verbally by two negation particles (*neVpas*) or only post-verbally (*Vpas*). In a colloquial variety of French, one major factor leading to *ne*-omission is the influence of subject clitics which have been claimed to be affixes (cf. e.g. Culbertson 2010). If colloquial French subject clitics are prefixed agreement markers, preverbal *ne*-realization is impossible, since it cannot interfere between an affix and its base. Variable *ne* realization in corpora is explained by the fact that French speakers alternate constantly between Standard French – where we have clitic subjects, i.e. true clitics – and Colloquial French – where clitics are agreement prefixes.

We will show that this last claim raises several questions such as: what do the pronominal and/or affixal paradigms of Colloquial and Standard French look like? What triggers ‘code-switching’ between these two varieties? After discussing the implications of a ‘two-grammar model’ for French, we present new data from a phonetically transcribed corpus. On the one hand, these support Culbertson’s (2010) analysis by showing that *ne* never co-occurs with some non-standard clitic-variants such as [ʒ] and [ʃ] for *je* or [i] for *il*. But on the other hand, the corpus analysis also shows that *ne*-omission rates form a continuum between 0% and 100%, and that it is in fact more frequent with some clitic subjects than with others. We will discuss how these results fit into the picture of two varieties (standard and colloquial French) coexisting in French speakers, and suggest an alternative explanation for our findings. We will argue that *ne* is highly context sensitive with respect to the element to its left and to its right and we will implement this observation in the framework of Distributed Morphology.

## Reference:

Culbertson, Jennifer (2010), “Convergent evidence for categorial change in French: From subject clitic to agreement marker”, *Language* 86-1, 85-132.