

On the syntactic change of expletive negation from Latin to French

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Expletive negation is the umbrella label for the cross-linguistic phenomenon whereby a preverbal negative marker appearing in embedded position does not contribute proper negative meaning. This talk targets the controversy that surrounds the status of expletive negation. Focusing on French data, I present diachronic evidence against the claim that expletive negation is a (vacuous or desemanticized) standard negative marker (Espinal, 2007). I pursue the alternative hypothesis that French features two distinct negative markers (Zanuttini, 1997; Chatzopoulou, 2013).

Data: In French, in the embedded context of one of its triggers, expletive negation is ungrammatical with the indicative mood, as in (1-b). Note that the only conceivable interpretation of *ne* would be obtained if *ne* itself licensed a strong NPI (*pas*), obtaining a negative reading.

- (1) a. Jane ne doute pas qu'il (ne) pleuve{SUBJ}.
b. Jane ne doute pas qu'il (*ne) pleuvra{IND} (pas).

The contribution of this talk is to provide diachronic evidence that expletive and sentential negation shouldn't be conceived as identical: in Latin, expletive negation (*ne*) was morphologically distinct from sentential negation (*non*), as shown in (2-b). Importantly, unlike sentential negation, expletive negation is sensitive to mood specification. In root contexts, *ne* blocks indicative mood, allowing only for imperative or subjunctive mood, see (2-a).

- (2) a. Ne fac / facias!
Not do-2SG.IMP / do-2SG.SUBJ.
'Don't do (it)!'
b. Timeo ne (non) pluat.
Fear-1SG.IND not neg rain-3SG.SUBJ
'I fear that-not it might (not) rain.'

Following Zanuttini (1997), I posit that, in Romance languages, expletive negation hosts its own NegP projection (labeled NegP₂), adjoined to the MoodP (see also Abels, 2005 and Zovko-Dinkovic, 2017 for Russian) while sentential negation (NegP₁) has a lower syntactic position, scoping over the TenseP. To gather evidence that expletive negation is a specialized marker of negation in French, I compare the numerical evolution of the standard negative marker *ne* to the numerical evolution of expletive negation, embedded under fear verbs, based on a written corpus spanning from Old to Modern French (1100-1900). French became a Negative Concord language, ie. a language that marks negation with the obligatory co-occurrence of two distinguished negative markers (*ne ... pas*) after undergoing the Jespersen cycle. The Jespersen cycle proceeds from a solitary marker of negation (*ne*), to the progressive reinforcing of this simple negative marker with the addition of a postverbal element (*pas*) (see Jespersen, 1917, Rowlett, 1998, among many others). In Old and Middle French (1100-1550), expletive and sentential negation are expressed with the same negative marker, *ne*. Thus, when *ne* appears in the embedded context of fear verbs, its interpretation can be ambiguous, as in (3).

- (3) Ay peur que ne veulhe manger de noustre veneson. (1477)
Have.1-SG.PRES fear that *ne* want.3-SG.PRES.SUBJ eat of our venison.
'I fear that he might want / might not want to eat our venison.'

If expletive and sentential negation are homophonous, a selection pressure should apply, accross generations, against ambiguity. We expect the conflict between the two interpretations of *ne* to be resolved when negative doubling becomes obligatory by 1650, and the rate of use of expletive negation to strongly increase, which our data confirms, see Figure 1.

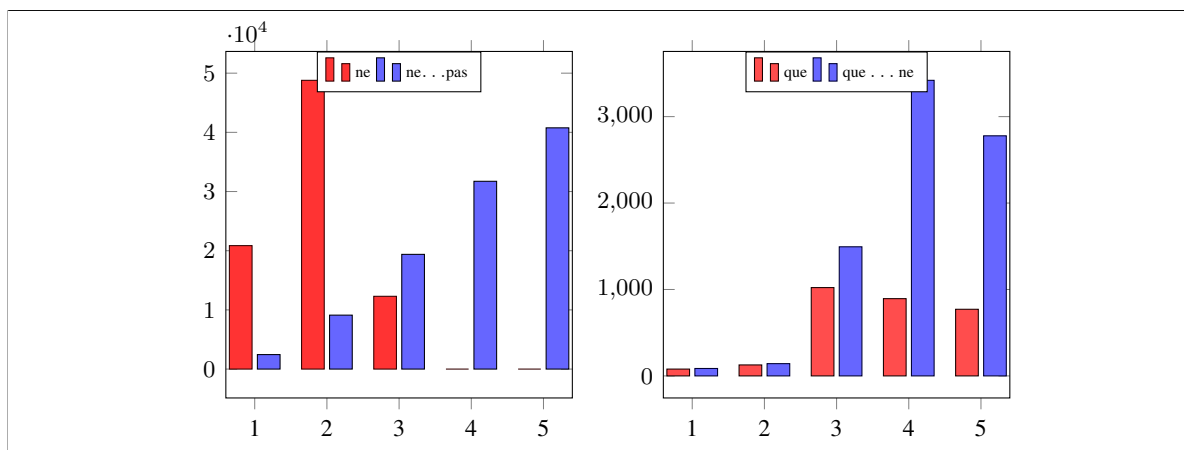
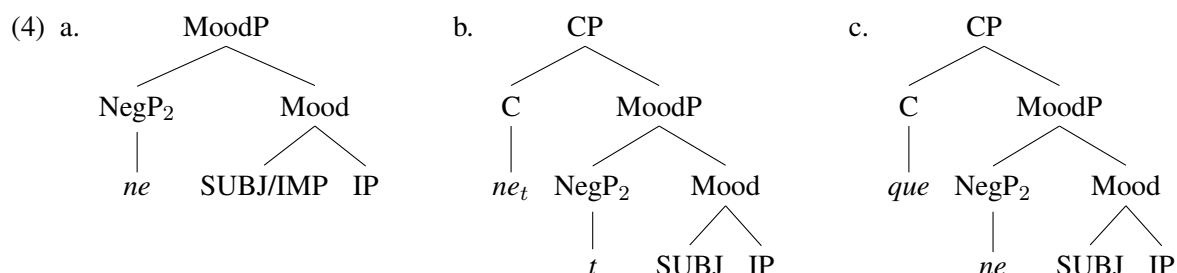


Figure 1: On the right, distributions of simple and discontinuous standard negations; on the left, numerical distributions of the mere complementizer *que* or of the presence of expletive negation with fear predicates (*avoir peur*, *craindre*). Numbers on the *x* axis refer to periods of the corpus (1: Old French (1100-1330), 2: Middle French (1330-1550); 3: Renaissance French (1550-1650); 4: Pre-Modern French (1650-1800); 5: Modern French (1800-1900). On the *y* axis, we have the number of occurrences of the variables. Note that 10^4 indicates that the number of the *y* axis must be multiplied by ten to the fourth.

Diachronic Analysis: I follow Zanuttini’s 1997 proposal that NegP₂ in root position is adjoined to the left of the Mood^o, in its specifier position, see (4-a). In its Latin embedded uses, *ne* is raised to the C^o position, see (4-b) (see also Chatzopoulou, 2013). Note that in its C^o position *ne* is not optional. In Old and Modern French, *ne* can only be found embedded under the complementizer *que*. At this stage, the C^o position being saturated, *ne* is no longer raised in C^o and becomes optional, see (4-c).



Future research should explain why *ne* only receives a non-negative reading when placed in embedded position. Given current explanations (Espinal, 2007, Yoon, 2011, Chatzopoulou, 2013), *ne* receives a nonnegative reading when licensed as a NPI by a nonveridical predicate, ie. an operator which does not entail the truth of its complement (Giannakidou, 1999; Giannakidou & Mari, 2018a,b). Within this perspective, although we can account for expletive negation’s sensitivity to the subjunctive mood, we cannot make sense of the fact that a nonveridical predicate like *believe* doesn’t license expletive negation, not in any language.

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