

**Something old, something new, something borrowed, something true:
what are null subjects in French?**

Martine Leroux
University of Ottawa

Contrary to other Romance languages, French is traditionally classified as a “non-pro-drop” language (Haegeman, 1997, Pollock, 1998; Heap, 2000, Oliviéri, 2004), meaning that the grammatical subject must be expressed. However, examination of spoken French reveals that the subject is sometimes omitted in speech, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) *Si ils sont pour le laisser sortir dans six mois, [Ø] sont aussi bien de le tuer.*
(XX/52:706)
‘If they are to let him out in six months, [Ø] might as well kill him.’

Previous work established that the null variant found in contemporary Canadian French speech was not borrowed from the dominant English language (Leroux and Jarmasz, 2006), contrary to assumptions often made about any deviation from an idealized norm of this language. How then can ellipsis be explained? This paper examines whether it could be a recent internal development or a retention from an older form of French when subject omission was generalized.

The rare inferences of the occurrence of null subjects in contemporary French all centre around the same conditioning elements: informal speech style, richness of verbal morphology, grammatical person of the subject, verb type, parallelism in polarity, retention of the previous verb tense and identity with the previous subject.

To assert if these characterizations reflect actual usage and if they show any signs of change, I analyzed 900 tokens of spontaneous speech taken from two distinct generations of informants born in the 20th century, as instantiated by the *Ottawa-Hull French Corpus* (Poplack, 1989). Results reveal that both old and young speakers share the same conditioning of variant choice: ellipsis is favoured first and foremost by the lexical verb *falloir* [‘must’] (92% of which co-occur with a null subject) and then by plural referents, conjoined clauses and the initial position in a clause. This parallelism in apparent-time argues against change in progress and suggests retention. However, none of the factors selected as statistically significant by the multivariate analysis correspond to the above-mentioned motivations offered in the literature to explain the use of null subjects.

In order to test if these discrepancies between the accounts in the literature and actual usage were due to change pre-dating the 20th century, I systematically compared the apparent-time results with 882 tokens of real-time data taken from speakers born in the 19th century, as instantiated by the *Récits du français québécois d’autrefois* (Poplack and St-Amand, forthcoming, 2007). Results confirm that the lexical conditioning of null subjects noted with *falloir* was already well in place a century and a half ago and that, with the exception of one factor group (form of the previous token), the elements influencing variant choice were the same at the three different points in time examined. These findings seem to indicate that null subjects in French are not new.

References

- HAEGEMAN, L. (1997). Register variation, truncation, and subject omission in English and in French. *English Language and Linguistics* 1 (2): 233-270.
- HEAP, D. (2000). *La variation grammaticale en géolinguistique: les pronoms sujet en roman central*, Munich: Lincom Europa.
- LEROUX, M. and L. JARMASZ (2006). "A study about nothing: Null subjects as a diagnostic of convergence between English and French". *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 12.2: *Selected papers from NWAV 34*, 1–14.
- OLIVIÉRI, M. (2004). "Paramètre du sujet nul et inversion du sujet dans les dialectes italiens et occitans". In *Cahiers de grammaire: Questions de linguistique et de dialectologie romanes* 29, 105–120.
- POLLOCK, J.-Y. (1998). On the Syntax of Subnominal Clitics: Cliticization and Ellipsis, *Syntax* 1:300-330.
- POPLACK, S. (1989). "The care and handling of a mega-corpus". In R. Fasold and D. Schiffrin (eds), *Language Change and Variation*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 411–451.
- POPLACK, S. and A. ST-AMAND (forthcoming in 2007). "A real-time window on 19th century vernacular French: *The Récits du français québécois d'autrefois*". *Language in Society*, 36, 5.