

Experimental Evidence on Subject Doubling in Spoken French

The status of pronominal subject clitics in French as arguments or agreement affixes has been heavily debated by morphologists and syntacticians (see for example Legendre *et al* 2002, Auger 1994, Rizzi 1986, De Cat 2004). One construction that has been brought to bear on the issue is clitic doubling, as in (1), which has traditionally been claimed to support a morphological analysis of clitics. Subject doubling appears in several varieties of French including Canadian French, Picard French, and some varieties of Spoken Parisian French, and involves the “reduplication” of the subject by a clitic pronoun. This poster discusses previous work on subject doubling in Spoken Parisian French and Canadian French, and presents new experimental results on the current pattern of subject doubling in Spoken Parisian French. The impact of these results on the analysis of French subjects as agreement markers is discussed.

- (1) Jean **il=** mange. (Spoken French)
John he.NOM eat.3SG
John is eating.

The results of the experiment reveal that clitic-doubling in Spoken French is sensitive to a number of factors. Previous work on clitic doubling in Spoken French suggests that doubling is unacceptable when the subject of the sentence is focused in the discourse, but acceptably when it is a topic. De Cat (2004) found that given the choice between non-doubled and doubled sentences answering focus questions, as in (2Q), speakers reliably chose the non-doubled option, as in (2A). She also suggests, based on non-experimental observation that topic subjects, as in (3A), may or must be doubled depending on the dialect of French. De Cat argues that the clause structure of French predicts this pattern if clitic subjects are taken as arguments. In other words, in the licit structures only, the full subject is housed within a functional projection outside of the clause (e.g. TopicP), leaving room for the clitic pronoun in IP.

- (2) Q. Qui ont fini leurs devoirs?
who has.3PL finished their homework
Who finished their homework?
A. Les étudiants (*ils) ont fini leurs devoirs.
the students have.3PL finished their homework
The students finished their homework.
- (3) Q. Jean a embrassé qui?
John has.3SG kissed who
Who did John kiss?
A. Jean **il=** a embrassé Marie.
John he.NOM has.3SG kissed Marie
John kissed Marie.

In the experiment presented here, the interaction between the discourse status of the subject and the presence of clitic doubling was in fact significant, potentially

supporting De Cat's findings. However her hypothesis predicts that, based on the underlying structure of the clause, doubling should be impossible in the context of sentential focus, as in (4A). The findings of the experiment, however suggest that participants judged doubled sentential focus sentences to be equally as acceptable as doubled topic sentences. This unexpected lack of contrast needs to be explained, either by positing a different underlying structure for sentential focus, or by looking for another hypothesis to explain the overall pattern of clitic-doubling which *does* predict this outcome. In addition, the experiment found a significant effect of subject definiteness, a result that is also not accounted for under De Cat's hypothesis since a purely structural account does not predict such effects.

(4) Q. Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?

What happened?

A. Jean **il=** a embrassé Marie.

John he.NOM has.3SG kissed Marie

John kissed Marie.

A preliminary analysis of the new data reconsiders the clausal structure of these discourse contexts in French and suggests that the pattern of subject doubling may not be easily accounted for structurally. I argue instead that the French pattern supports the hypothesis, proposed by Auger (1994), Legendre *et al* (2004) and others, that pronominal subject clitics are in fact markers of agreement. Although some evidence still points to Parisian French subject clitics as arguments, I argue that the language is undergoing change, and that these clitics are being reanalyzed as agreement markers. Thus several observed effects involving the behavior of subject clitics are in fact remnants of the previous status of subject clitics as arguments. Data from child language that may support this conclusion is briefly discussed as well.

References:

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