

Null subjects, expletives and the status of Medieval French

Michael Zimmermann
University of Konstanz

Among the major Romance languages, Modern (Standard) French stands out due to its being “a notoriously non-pro-drop language” (Pollock 1989:381,fn.17). In fact, unless the subject of a finite clause is expressed by a non-pronominal DP or by a pronoun other than a subject pronoun, subject pronouns are generally expressed, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) *Modern (Standard) French*
*(II) n’ a pas pu entrer dans la ville.
he not has not could to.enter into the city
‘He could not enter the city.’

In the medieval stages of French, i.e. Old French (9th-13th c.) and Middle French (14th-16th c.), however, subject pronouns are not consistently expressed in these contexts, as shown in (2) by the Old French equivalent of (1).

- (2) *Old French*
Ne pot intrer en la ciutat ; (*saint-léger*, p.166)
not could to.enter in the city
‘He could not enter the city;’

Medieval French is therefore generally analyzed as a null subject language. Still, it differs considerably from modern Romance null subject languages such as Italian and Spanish in the availability of non-expressed subject pronouns. Specifically, unlike in the latter languages, (referential) subject pronouns are frequently expressed in the former in cases of an extremely high degree of antecedent accessibility (Franzén 1939, Roberts 1993, Vance 1997), in particular in embedded clauses in which their expression is highly predominant, as illustrated in (3) for the third person masculine singular referential subject pronoun *il* ‘he’.

- (3) *Old French*
Treze anz mist li reis á faire sun paleis od tutes les
thirteen years needed the king to to.make his palace with all the
apurtences, é puis que il out fait le temple Deu é sun demeine
near.relations, and then that he had made the temple God and his domain
paleis é quanque il out desíred a faire, ... (*livre reis*, p.133)
palace and all.that he had desired to to.make
‘The king needed thirteen years to build his palace together with his near relations, and when he had built the temple of the Lord and his own palace and all what he had desired to do, ...’

Moreover, unlike any other null subject language (Haider 2001), Medieval French has expletive subject pronouns expressed (Arteaga & Herschensohn 2004, 2006), as shown in (4) for expletive *il* ‘it’.

- (4) *Old French*
Des saintuaires ne covient il mie parler, car autant en
of.the relics not is.advisable it not to.speak for so.many of.them
avoit il en cel jour en la vile conme ou remenant dou monde.
was.having it in this day in the city as in.the rest of.the world

(*conquête*, p.138)

‘Of the relics it is not necessary to speak, for there were as many of these in those days in the city as in the rest of the world.’

In light of these cross-linguistically uncommon and, respectively, idiosyncratic phenomena, this talk readdresses the issue of the status of Medieval French. Rather than in terms of a partial null subject language (Holmberg, Nayudu & Sheehan 2009, Roberts & Holmberg 2010, Holmberg 2010), it will be argued that Medieval French had best be analyzed as a non-null subject language (Zimmermann 2009, 2012, to appear). This analysis is essentially based on the observation that in a non-null subject language such as Modern (Standard) French, non-expressed subject pronouns, both referential and expletive, are licit in specific contexts, as illustrated in (5).

(5) *Modern (Standard) French*

- a. Mon frère et moi (**nous**) avons décidé de nous associer.
my brother and I we have decided to ourselves to join forces
‘My brother and I, we decided to join forces.’
- b. Il faut que (**il**) soit mis fin à la guerre.
it must that it be put end to the war
‘The war must be put to an end.’

In line with numerous null subject approaches to Medieval French (*inter alia* Adams 1987, Roberts 1993, Vance 1997), it will be argued that subject pronouns may only be non-expressed, when specific structural conditions are met, and this principally in the clearly identifiable context of left-peripheral focalization.

References

- Adams, Marianne. 1987. *Old French, null subjects, and verb second phenomena*. Los Angeles, CA: PhD dissertation.
- Arteaga, Deborah & Julia Herschensohn. 2004. Case, agreement, and expletives. A parametric difference in Old French and Modern French. In Julie Auger, Joseph Clancy Clements & Barbara Vance (eds.), *Contemporary approaches to Romance linguistics. Selected papers from the 33rd Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages (LSRL)*, 1-15. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Arteaga, Deborah & Julia Herschensohn. 2006. Il était une fois. Diachronic development of expletives, case, and agreement from Latin to Modern French. In Randall Gess & Deborah Arteaga (eds.), *Historical Romance linguistics. Retrospective and perspectives*, 269-286. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Franzén, Torsten. 1939. *Étude sur la syntaxe des pronoms personnels sujets en ancien français*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Haider, Hubert. 2001. Parametrisierung in der generativen Grammatik. In Martin Haspelmath, Ekkehard König, Wulf Oesterreicher & Wolfgang Raible (eds.), *Language typology and language universals. An international handbook, volume 1*, 283-293. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2010. The null generic subject pronoun in Finnish: A case of incorporation in T. In Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds.), *Parametric variation: Null subjects in minimalist theory*, 200-230. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmberg, Anders, Aarti Nayudu & Michelle Sheehan. 2009. Three partial null-subject languages: A comparison of Brazilian Portuguese, Finnish and Marathi. *Studia Linguistica* 63(1). 59-97.
- Pollock, Jean-Yves. 1989. Verb Movement, Universal Grammar, and the Structure of IP. *Linguistic Inquiry* 20(3). 365-424.
- Roberts, Ian. 1993. *Verbs and diachronic syntax. A comparative history of English and French*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Roberts, Ian & Anders Holmberg. 2010. Introduction: Parameters in minimalist theory. In Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds.), *Parametric variation: Null subjects in minimalist theory*, 1-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vance, Barbara. 1997. *Syntactic change in Medieval French. Verb-second and null subjects*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Zimmermann, Michael. 2009. On the evolution of expletive subject pronouns in Old French. In Georg A. Kaiser & Eva-Maria Remberger (eds.), *Proceedings of the workshop Null-subjects, Expletives, and Locatives in Romance*, 63-92. Konstanz: Fachbereich Sprachwissenschaft, Universität Konstanz.
- Zimmermann, Michael. 2012. *The evolution of expletive subject pronouns in French*. Konstanz: doctoral dissertation.
- Zimmermann, Michael. To appear. *Expletive and referential subject pronouns in Medieval French*. Book series *Linguistische Arbeiten*. Berlin: De Gruyter.