Analysis of the Standard French ne-*drop Phenomenon*

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1   INTRODUCTION[1]

In present-day France, the preverbal negative particle *ne* is rapidly falling out of use. Instead of hearing the previously standard (1),

> *(1) Je ne veux pas y aller.*
>   'I don't want to go there.'

one now commonly encounters the slightly different form as expressed in sentence 2:

> *(2) Je veux pas y aller.*
>   'I don't want to go there.'

The evolution of this phenomenon has reached a fairly advanced stage, to the point that many linguists consider the French negation pair *ne…pas* to have become simply the postverbal *pas*, with the *ne* a redundant marker of negativity (Gaatone 1971, Ashby 2001).

Using established theories of language evolution, particularly Jespersen's Cycle and the Neg First Principle, this thesis considers the historical picture of French negation as it has developed to include — and, now, sometimes to exclude — *ne*. The evolution of negative particle patterns in sister languages are investigated to give insight into the direction French negation may potentially be headed.

Next, the recent patterns of the *ne*-drop phenomenon are introduced to provide some understanding of factors that may influence *ne*-retention or *ne*-drop in a particular environment. Special attention is paid to phonological and syntactic variables; stylistic, demographic, and practical considerations are also briefly discussed.

Finally, after sufficient background has been established, a few well-defined environments are carefully dissected for their probable effect on the near future of *ne*. This detailed analysis addresses characteristics of those environments and of French in general in order to argue that those specified circumstances will hinder the loss of *ne* from the standard French language.

2   THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1   First evidence of *ne*-drop

Although authors disagree about when *ne*-drop first began, documentation makes it clear that the phenomenon has been around for centuries. Ashby (1981) notes occasional *ne*-drop as early as the 16th century; Schwegler (1983) specifies that in direct questions and exceptionally in a few other constructions, *pas* or *point* carried negativity alone as early as the 17th century.

Between 1820 and 1850 spoken French began to differ markedly from written French by a sudden increase in the number of *ne* omissions. Three noteworthy people, the Comtesse de Ségur, Maupassant, and Zola, managed to make *ne*-drop fashionable both in progressive urban and in more conservative rural communities. It is hardly surprising, then, that written French shows strong evidence of *ne*-drop at least as early as

1833, at which time Balzac used the phenomenon stylistically in his works (Pohl 1975:23).

The *ne*-drop phenomenon was formally addressed at least as early as the dissertation published by Dettenborn in 1875, "Réflexions sur l'emploi de la négation." Dettenborn acknowledges the suppression of *ne* by poets and in popular parlance, but stresses that taking such license is completely forbidden in prose. At that time, Dettenborn lacked access to most of the theories and ideas which today are used to study this *ne*-drop trend.

2.2   Theory

Certainly, as languages evolve it is unsurprising that their means of negation should change. In the case of French, the historical development of written negation can be traced back many centuries. This long-term data collection is facilitated by the fact that French derives from Latin, the language of many extant ancient manuscripts.

In the view of many linguists, derivation of the current French negative particle pair, *ne...pas*, can be satisfactorily explained by Jespersen's Cycle, which is based on phonological weakening and bolstering. This view will be challenged in Section 2.2.3 by an argument based on word ordering and the incorporation of emphasizers into negation.

2.2.1   *Jespersen's Cycle*

As early as 1917, a theory describing the cycling of negative adverbs was introduced. Jespersen, whose name has since been given to this phenomenon, posited that in any language a negative particle will go through a cycle wherein "the original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in its turn may be felt as the negative

proper and may then in course of time be subject to the same development as the original word" (Jespersen 1917:4). Jespersen based his theory to a large extent on a pattern he noticed in the French language, an increasing tendency even in the early 1900's to drop the *ne* of the negation pair *ne...pas*.

Table 1. Evolution of French Negation	
Old Latin	*ne* + V
Middle Latin	*ne* + *oenum* + V
Classical Latin	*non* + V
Old French	*nen* + V
Middle French	*ne* + V + (*pas)*
Classical French	*ne* + V + *pas*
Modern French	(*ne*) + V + *pas*
Future French (?)	V + *pas*
(?)	*pas* + V

Meanwhile, as described by Jespersen's Cycle, Old Latin's negative particle, *ne*, was rather phonologically weak. In consequence, this negative particle was strengthened by the addition of the emphasizing word *oenum*, which meant "one thing." Gradually, *ne* and this additional word convolved into the *non* of Classical Latin. By the time of Old French, *non* had vowel-shifted to *nen*, which through phonetic weakening emerged as Middle French's *ne* (Horn 1989:253).

Ne proved once more to be too phonologically weak to carry the burden of negation; this time, French "small" words such as *mie* ("crumb"), *pas* ("step"), *point* ("point"), *grain* ("grain"), *goutte* ("drop"), *brin* ("blade of grass"), and *mot* ("word") were added as reinforcement for the *ne* (Dettenborn 1875:6).

(3) *ne...goutte*
     'not...a drop'

For example, expression 3 might be used to change 'I did<u>n't</u> drink,' using only *ne* to negate, to 'I drank <u>not a drop</u>!' or 'I did<u>n't</u> drink <u>a drop</u>!' using the reinforcing "tiny" word *goutte*. This strengthening method proved successful, and in Classical French it can be seen that negation in general required a forclusif, such a second negative particle[2]. Several different reinforcing negative particles were in use, but the pair *ne...pas* came to be dominant (Jespersen 1917:7).

In Modern French, the *ne* is so weak as to be arguably perceived as redundant; it is used only some of the time. *Pas*, or another of several post-verbal forclusives, now carries negative meaning by itself more than 80% of the time (Ashby 2001)[3]. Presumably, the language will continue to evolve to the point where the *ne* is no longer optional, but instead archaic. At this point, we would expect *pas* generally to carry the negativity in French (Ashby 1981). Many linguists already identify French as having strictly postverbal negation, not preverbal negation, as found in Latin, or embracing negation, as found in Classical French (Schwegler 1983).

2.2.2   The Neg First Principle

According to Jespersen, languages also have "a natural tendency...to place the negative first, ...very often immediately before the particular word to be negatived" (1917:6). This tendency can be a motivating factor for Jespersen's cycling of a language's negative particles. To clarify, Horn (1989:452) describes this Neg First principle as "express[ing] the strong tendency for negative markers to gravitate leftward so as to precede the finite verb or other possible loci of negation." Such a pattern often

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[2] The term 'forclusif', first used by Damourette & Pichon (1911-40), indicates that the negation, which is opened by *ne* to indicate discordance between the predicate and other factors, has been completed or forclosed, marking the end of the scope of negation.
[3] The most recent data available was collected in 1995 and 1998 (Ashby 2001).

serves to alert the audience early to the negation, a philosophy particularly useful in imperatives, wherein failure to indicate negation might literally mean the difference between life and death (Horn 1989:449).

(4) Don't kill her!

(5) ?Kill her not!

In sentence 4, the negative marker appears before the main verb. If following instructions, the individual addressed would have no reason to lop off the object's head; the negation is immediately clear. On the contrary, in sentence 5, which uses an archaic English form, the individual addressed might already have cruelly murdered the object before hearing the negation and realizing his error.

Neg First, should it be triggered in French, might influence standard French negation to modify the form

$$V + pas$$

to yield

$$pas + V$$

as the preferred form of negation. This possibility is carefully analyzed in section 2.2.4.

Influential though the Neg First principle may be, it tends to interact and interfere with Jespersen's Cycle, thereby creating strong potential for flux in the negation patterns of a language. This give-and-take, where the forces of Jespersen's Cycle result in a strong postverbal negative which Neg First seeks to move to a preverbal slot, helps explain the historical shifting of negative markers.

However, the Neg First principle does not posit possible mechanisms by which this shift in negative marker location might occur. Furthermore, while it does nicely

describe many languages' negative predicate structures, Neg First fails to explain why several languages, despite having postverbal negation, give every indication of a fully stable negative structure.

2.2.3   *Schwegler's Arguments against Neg First*

Schwegler has considered the underlying assumptions for the Neg First principle and found them somewhat unsound (1983). In his view, Neg First requires some mechanism by which to occur; the populace does not simply decide to negate preverbally instead of postverbally and begin instantly to do so.

Taking this viewpoint, then, Schwegler (1983) evaluates what circumstances might enable and motivate a shift in negative location with respect to the predicate. In particular, he examines the role of emphasizers, which Jespersen's Cycle identifies as very important in the evolution of a language's negatives. Important considerations are: the locations in which the emphasizers can appear; the potentially resulting ability for the emphasizers to merge with each other or the negative proper; and those factors of change which might somehow restructure the ordering of the language and, consequently, the natural insertion location of those emphasizers (Schwegler 1983).

Consider the role of emphasizers in the development of French negation. Two key stages are:

> Middle Latin   *ne + oenum + V*

and

> Middle French   *ne + V + (pas)*

Remember that Latin is an OV language, whereas French is a VO language. Thus, when Latin added an emphasizer the "small object" was naturally placed just before the verb,

while when French added an emphasizer the placement was naturally postverbal. Based on the proximity of Latin's *ne* and *oenum*, those two words were easily merged; one did not replace the other. In French, however, the evolution from OV to VO sentence structure occurred before the addition of the minimizer *pas*, whose insertion location was consequently postverbal. At the same time, preverbal negation had been inherited from Latin. Thus, the historical form of French negation, *ne*, was separated from its emphasizer by the verb; such separation precludes the fusing of the two negative markers (Schwegler 1983). Then, as Jespersen's Cycle is leading French to evolve and rely more heavily on its emphasizers to carry negative meaning, the postverbal *pas* is largely replacing the preverbal *ne*.

According to Schwegler, the end word-order of predicate negation depends predominantly on the basic syntactic typology, VO or OV. He claims that shift in the position of the negative particle with respect to the verb should only be possible when the sentence structure is of the form:

$$OV + NEG$$

or

$$NEG + VO$$

because the emphasizer would otherwise never get reinterpreted on the opposite side of the verb as the new negative particle. French structure originally corresponded to the second form; Schwegler's argument, then, corresponds well to the present-day shifting in French negative particle position to the right side of the verb. While other factors, such as internal, dialectal conditions, may play influential roles, they are seldom strong enough to effect a change in word order of negatives. More likely, they, along with adstratum

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influences and phonetic weakening of the negative particle, merely speed up the rate of evolution of predicate negation in the language (Schwegler 1983).

Furthermore, Schwegler hypothesizes that the language type (VO or OV) and the current position of the negative particle together determine whether fusion of emphasizer with the negative is possible, or if word shift is possible (i.e. Neg First can take effect)[4]. According to his arguments, either fusion or word shift is possible, never both and never neither. In sum, Schwegler (1983) puts forth forceful arguments against accepting Neg First as an effective theory for describing the direction evolution is and will leading French predicate negation.

2.2.4   *Potential* **pas** *shift in French*

If *ne* is fully lost as a productive negative marker, it is reasonable to assume that *pas* will take on its general negation role. This opens *pas* to the same evolutionary processes that formerly affected *ne*.

From the Neg First principle it follows that *pas* should move to a V-anterior position. Once there, this new negative particle should begin undergoing Jespersen's cyclic weakening and strengthening process.

However, Schwegler's argument (1983) against this particular oversimplification of negative position and evolution must be addressed. From Schwegler's viewpoint, a specific motivation would be necessary for a change in *pas* location because when French becomes a VO + NEG language, word-order shift of predicate negation should be impossible. Given that French shows no evidence of changing from VO to an OV language, and given that emphasizers added to augment the negation would appear either as adverbs immediately before *pas* or as objects immediately following *pas*, it is probable

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[4] For further details, see chart (Schwegler 1983:324).

that the Neg First principle will not be able to apply, and the negative French particle *pas* will remain postverbal. This, however, would not prevent Jespersen's Cycle from playing a continuing role in the evolution of French negation; *pas* may fuse with those hypothetical reinforcing adverbs or objects, since they will naturally appear in immediate proximity to *pas*.

2.3   Related evolution

Several of French's sister languages have also struggled with evolution of their negative particle(s). Of those considered, the most recent offshoot from standard French is that spoken in Montréal, followed by the French creoles, and then followed by three other Romance dialects, which are the least closely related to French. Each of these languages or dialects currently illustrates a slightly different stage of *ne*-drop and treatment of the remaining alternative negative particle(s).

2.3.1   *French spoken in Montréal*

The *ne*-drop phenomenon in the Montréal dialect of French has progressed much more quickly than in standard French. According to Sankoff and Vincent, who performed an exhaustive statistical study of this topic in 1977, *ne* does continue to be used as a productive marker of negativity despite its infrequence:

> *Bien que le* ne *soit le plus souvent employé en association avec d'autres marqueurs de styles soignés, dans les expressions figées ou dans un contexte métalinguistique, [Sankoff et Vincent montrent] que cette particule joue toujours son rôle comme morphème de négation, même si l'emploi productif du* ne *est très rare et redondant.*

> > 'Although the *ne* is most often used in association with other signs of careful styles, in fixed expressions, or in a metalinguistical context, [Sankoff and Vincent] show that this particle still plays its role as a morpheme of negation, even if the productive use of *ne* is very rare and redundant.'

As those linguists note, however, the relative frequency of *ne*-retention is very small; with the exception of one Québecoise, who retained *ne* in 8% of the possible instances, those who used *ne* productively at all did so in only 1% of the possible constructions[5]. Three in every four of the interviewed Québecois did not use *ne* productively even a single time. Overall, *ne* was omitted from 9,954 of 10,000 potential sites: thus, more than 99.5% of the time.

As Ashby (1981) summarizes, "Sankoff & Vincent conclude that the loss of *ne* has stopped just short of completion in Montreal French, where it remains as a stylistic variant." Negation in Montréal French is no longer the embracing negation *ne...pas*; now negation is postverbal, using *pas* alone except for stylistic variations. Because the French spoken in Montréal and other regions of Québec has such recent ties to standard French, the degree of *ne*-loss and the arguable achievement of *ne*-drop equilibrium illustrate a direction standard French might potentially be headed.

2.3.2   *French creoles*

Because many creoles have derived from French, studying their patterns of negation may give some more ideas of possible evolution routes for standard French negation. It would make sense that formation of the creole languages, a potentially turbulent process marked by a great deal of grammatical and structural changes in a short

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[5] Sankoff and Vincent's definition of "productive" excludes fixed expressions, such as sentence (a), and the specific sentences (b) and (c).
> (a) *n'importe quoi*
>> 'no matter what'
> (b) *si je ne m'abuse...*
>> 'unless I am mistaken...'
> (c) *ne serait-ce que....*
>> 'wouldn't it be that...'

time period, might have precipitated the process of negation evolution which has been relatively gradual in standard French.

Here, ten different French creoles are considered for both their negative particle and negator ordering, whether preverbal or postverbal:

Réunion
    [*pa*] postverbal
        (6) [*m   i   mãz pa*]
              me MKR eat NEG
              'I don't eat'

Louisiana (St. Martin)
    [*pa*] postverbal (follows tense marker)
        (7) [*mo te   pas kone_*]
              me PST NEG know
              'I didn't know'

Gaudeloupe
    [*pa*] preverbal, or postverbal with modals
        (8) [*mwã pa   ka   _ãte*]
              me NEG PROG sing
              'I'm not singing'
        (9) [*nu   ve   pa*]
              we want NEG
              'we don't want'

Mauritius
    [*pa*] preverbal
        (10) [*mo mõte pa   pe   travaj*]
              my watch NEG PROG work
              'my watch isn't working'

Seychelles
    [*pa*] preverbal
        (11) [*person   pa   pu   pik u*]
              nobody NEG FUT prick you
              'nobody is going to prick you'

Haiti
  [*pa*] preverbal
      (12) [*li   pas   t   av   ap   vi_ni_*]
              him NEG PST FUT PROG come
              'he wouldn't be coming'

Guyanese
  [*pa*] preverbal
      (13) [*mo pa   ka   dromi*]
              me NEG FUT sleep
              'I shan't sleep'

Cabo Verde
  [*ka*] preverbal
      (14) [*el   ka   ta   ba la*]
              he NEG HAB go there
              'he doesn't go there'

Guiné-Bissau
  [*ka*] preverbal
      (15) [*bu   ka   bi_*]
              you NEG come
              'you don't come'

Papiamento
  [*nwa*] preverbal
      (16) [*ningun hende nwa   tabata   sabi*]
              no   people NEG PST-PROG know
              'nobody knew'

In these examples, taken from Posner (1985), all of the creole negatives, [*pa*], [*ka*], and

[*nwa*], appear to have possibly derived from the French second negative, *pas*.

Meanwhile, the preverbal *ne* which would have been an expected inheritance from

French is nowhere evident.

   According to Posner, early creole texts do provide evidence for a [*napa*] preverbal

negator. This [*napa*] might derive either from the *ne pas* before French infinitives or

from a common expression such as *il n'est pas*, 'it's not', or *il n'y a pas*, 'there isn't'

(Posner 1985). Either way, the form [*napa*], the only documented evidence of the

standard French negative particle *ne* in the creoles, has long since evolved out of these languages. In these creoles, *ne* was not sufficiently robust to long withstand the pressures put upon it by rapid and drastic language changes.

Of the French creoles, most use preverbal negation: Mauritius, Seychelles, Haiti, Guyanese, Cabo Verde, Guiné-Bissau, Papiamento, and Guadeloupe. Postverbal negation is used in the creoles of Louisiana, Réunion, and sometimes Gaudeloupe, when modals are used. Why should this *pas*-derived form precede the verb in so many creoles while following the verb in standard French, even today? One important motivation might lie in the fact that most creoles derived their verb forms from the French infinitives. During the mid-17th century, about the time when the creoles were formed, French negation of infinitives was in the process of evolving from

ne INF *pas*

to

(*ne*) *pas* INF

(Posner 1985). This allows for two options: the underlying form for a given creole's negation at its inception would either be *ne*+V+*pas* or (*ne*+)*pas*+V.

So, perhaps those creoles with postverbal pas negation were formed at an earlier stage during this transitional period, while preverbal negation corresponds to those creoles formed at a later stage. Were this true, the lack of universal change of postverbal negation to preverbal negation over the time frame of a few hundred years would indicate that, at least in certain creoles, *pas*-shift has been resisted. This would support Schwegler's arguments that Neg First does not adequately explain negative particle

ordering with respect the verb, and would suggest that standard French will not shift its negative postverbal particle, *pas*, to a preverbal position.

Two alternative interpretations suggest themselves. The first possibility is that all the creoles formed from the postverbal *pas* stage, with most of the creoles then evolving to a preverbal *pas* stage. This would provide evidence in favor of Neg First for French-derived languages, suggesting that standard French will begin to show signs of *pas*-shift if *ne* drops fully from its tenuous role in productive negation. Alternatively, all the creoles may have formed from the preverbal *pas* stage, with a few of the creoles then evolving to a postverbal *pas* stage. This negative-particle shift would be extremely difficult to explain. Certainly, it would contradict Neg First; furthermore, Schwegler's arguments would only hold true if the postverbal negation creoles were all VO languages.

Thus, applying evidence from the French-derived creoles to modern standard French is difficult, at best. It is clear that the negative particle *ne* has been completely lost from all the creoles, so *ne* could not have been robust in rapid, drastic language changes. Beyond that conclusion, it would be nice to say that since the majority of French creoles show preverbal *pas*-derived negation, standard French might well be motivated in that direction. However, insufficient evidence exists to reinforce such a claim.

2.3.3   *Other postverbal Romance languages*

Romance dialects in at least three different regions of Europe use postverbal negation. If their historical evolutionary path of negation were similar to that of French, and those languages are now stable in their postverbal negation, that would suggest that French may fully convert to postverbal negation and remain there.

Northern Italy is geographically located between France, in which negation is largely postverbal, and the rest of Italy, whose standard dialect is preverbal. Thus, Northern Italy finds itself subject to the pressures of two differently-structured neighboring languages, both of which heavily influence the Northern Italian dialects.

While standard Italian has preverbal negation, most Northern Italian dialects use strictly postverbal negation. These negative particles derive from words of emphasis, such as *nen* < *ne ente* ('not a thing') in sentence 18, *mia* < *mica* ('a crumb') in sentence 19, and *ren* < *rem nata* ('a born thing') in sentence 23 (Schwegler 1983). Note that the dialect represented by sentence 24 uses embracing negation, a transitional stage through which, according to Schwegler (1983), all the other Northern Italian dialects have gone in the process of changing over from preverbal negation to various postverbal negation forms.

Standard Italian
    (17) Questa donna <u>non</u> mi piace.
        This woman there not me pleases.
        'I don't like this woman.'

Northern Italian dialects
    (18) Sa dona me pyas <u>nen</u>.
        This woman me pleases not.
        'I don't like this woman.'

    (19) Sta fomna la m pyaz <u>mia</u>.
        This woman there me pleases not.
        'I don't like this woman.'

    (20) Ketta femalla me ple <u>po</u>.
        This woman me pleases not.
        'I don't like this woman.'

(21) *Ekela femna ma play pa.*
    This woman me pleases not.
    'I don't like this woman.'

(22) *Akelo ffeme me pyay pa.*
    This woman me pleases not.
    'I don't like this woman.'

(23) *Akella fremo m agrad ren.*
    This woman me pleases not.
    'I don't like this woman.'

(24) *Kwela funna li no me pyas miga.*
    This woman there not me pleases not.
    'I don't like this woman.'

In Schwegler's view, the Northern Italian dialect in sentence 24 is headed in the same direction as its sisters: toward postverbal negation.

If Schwegler is correct in his hypothesis that embracing negation is only a temporary stage as a language changes from preverbal to postverbal negation, then standard French must be headed in a strictly postverbal direction. It is useful to note that in Northern Italian dialects, this postverbal shift was enabled predominantly by emphasizing words, a situation that parallels historical evidence from France and corresponds to Jespersen's Cycle.

Occitan

Modern Occitan, according to Schwegler (1983), has fully completed the cycle from preverbal negation through embracing negation to postverbal negation. The language now has two negatives, both derived from earlier emphasizers.

(25) *Sabe ges.*
    'I don't know.'

(26) *Sabe pas.*
    'I don't know.'

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At present, insofar as can be observed, modern Occitan has stable negation (Schwegler 1983). This language, which evolved away from the use of embracing negation around the end of the 19th century, shows no sign of movement back towards a preverbal form of negation, thereby implying that the Neg First principle either operates very slowly or has not been initiated in Occitan. This interpretation supports the possibility that Schwegler might be correct in his analysis of word-order change as relates to predicate negation. If so, this would imply that French, should the language complete its shift to postverbal *pas* negation, would not evolve back to preverbal negation unless other conditions, such as language type (currently, VO), first changed.

Romantsch (Sursilvan)

The three different regions of Romantsch have all reached different stages of negative particle evolution. In the West, where the Sursilvan dialect is spoken, preverbal negation no longer exists. There, Jespersen's Cycle has led from the preverbal negative particle, to postverbal minimizer words, to embracing negation, to a complete loss of the "original" preverbal particle (Posner 1985). Today, only postverbal particles, such as *buca*, are used (Schwegler 1983) [6]:

> (27) *Nus   murein buca.*
>   We   die   NOT
>   'We don't die.'

The central region of Romantsch uses embracing negation, with increasing tendency toward a purely postverbal structure. In the eastern region of Romantsch, however, despite the continued reliance on preverbal negation the use of emphasizing

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[6] This negative particle has preverbal placement in imperative constructions (Schwegler 1983). This condition satisfies one of the arguments for the Neg First principle, that people may need to be cognizant of negation early in a sentence, particularly when instructions are being issued.

particles is actually decreasing, indicating the dialect is shying away from an evolution to postverbal negation (Schwegler 1983).

Thus, conclusions to be drawn from this overall language region cannot be universal. Certainly, Sursilvan has undergone Jespersen's Cycling and currently shows stable postverbal negation despite the supposed applicability of Neg First, which should have produced pressure for the negative particle to move to a preverbal position. Evidence suggests that Central Romantsch is tending toward a similar postverbal negation construction, though this condition has not yet stabilized. Central Romantsch is following a similar trend to French, although French is currently further progressed toward postverbal negation. Finally, Eastern Romantsch appears to be stubbornly sticking to preverbal negation, turning away from the embracing negation construction which was becoming popular. While it is unclear why Eastern Romantsch should reject the possibility of embracing negation, this pattern does not parallel the evolution of French, so shall not be addressed.

2.4   Summary

Thus, the historical context of the French *ne*-drop has now been established. The phenomenon, though more than five centuries old, has recently realized a sudden rapid increasing in popularity. French *ne*-drop can be effectively explained by Jespersen's Cycle; however, the Neg First principle and Schwegler's hypothesis on word order in predicate negation are mutually contradictory in their predictions of expected effects on the new carrier of French negativity, *pas*. After looking at languages related to French which have followed similar evolutionary pathways, evidence suggests that *ne* may drop fully from its role of productive negation and that *pas*'s future is inconclusive.

3   RECENT PATTERNS OF *NE*-DROP

France has an artificial method of preserving the older language forms and of preventing the rapid change which has characterized so many other languages in recent decades, change of a magnitude such as *ne*-drop. The Académie Française, as this conservative institution is known, holds ultimate authority in what is—and what is not—officially accepted in the standard French language.

When questioned about the *Académie*'s stance on the *ne*-drop phenomenon, Hébert (personal communication), one of the members, spoke for the institution by unequivocally stating that:

> "*cette omission, caractéristique du style familier, est grammaticalement incorrecte*."

> 'this omission, characteristic of a familiar style, is grammatically incorrect.'

Thus, as far as France is officially concerned, *ne* cannot be dropped in complete sentences. Consequently, no official rules governing *ne*-drop usage exist.

Nonetheless, *ne* is dropped extremely frequently. In colloquial French, no one retains the negative particle *ne* in 100% of the circumstances dictated appropriate by that official arbiter of grammatical correctness, the Académie Française. At the other extreme, however, some individuals do drop the *ne* categorically (Ashby 1981:677). For each person, the likelihood of a particular instance of *ne*-drop seems to be influenced by the complicated balance of several variables. These variables certainly include, but are not necessarily limited to: phonological environment, syntactic structure, stylistic constraints, demographic background, and practical considerations.

Ashby (1976, 1981, 2001) has performed extensive analyses of three collections of oral interviews. In all three corpuses the speakers are native French of a variety backgrounds, ages, etc. The following data describing the current *ne*-drop patterns are based predominantly on his research[7].

3.1 Phonological variables

An analysis of the phonological contexts favoring *ne*-drop was one of the first tests run on the data collected. Ashby's statistical examination (1981) reveals two clear environments in which *ne*-retention is strongly favored: postpausally and between certain vowels.

3.1.1 Pause effects

Strongest of all the phonological factors influencing *ne*-retention was the condition identified as "postpausal." The term "postpausal" refers to the environment immediately following the resumption of speech. In Ashby's 1981 study, the effect of postpausality on *ne*-drop was striking. Before vowels, postpausal *ne* was retained every time; before consonants, postpausal *ne*-retention was an extremely high 85%. Both of these rates reflect unusually strong degrees of *ne*-retention, particularly in view of the fact that *ne*-retention only occurred in 37% of all potential sites in this corpus (Ashby 1981).

(28)   *La rose ... n'hésite pas à nous attaquer.*
          'The rose ... doesn't hesitate to attack us.'

(29)   *Moi, je ... ne rentre jamais chez moi.*
          'Me, I ... never return home.'

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[7] "Present-day" data were for the most part collected by Ashby in 1976, so are not as recent as might be hoped. Nonetheless, they represent the most comprehensive *ne*-drop data available.

In sentences 28 and 29, the pause is indicated by the "..." and should be interpreted as a full, noticeable break between the preceding word and the following word[8]. It is probable that the pause indicates a moment of reflection, in which the speaker is consciously thinking ahead and deliberately choosing his next words. Such belabored thinking might well result in *ne*-retention where otherwise the *ne* would have been glossed over.

3.1.2 Intervocalic positioning

The second important phonological environment influencing *ne*-retention proved to be the presence of vowels sandwiching the *ne*. However, not all vowel next-door-neighbors had the same effect on *ne*-drop. *Ne*-retention was highly preferred in intervocalic positions only when one or the other of those vowels was nasal.

(30)   *Le repas n'enrichit pas le chef.*
                    [_ n _ _]
                V   + /n/ +   V
            [-nasal]   [+nasal]
        'The meal doesn't make the chef rich.'

(31)   *Le peint n'est pas brun.*
                    [_ _ n e]
                V   + /n/ +   V
            [+nasal]   [-nasal]
        'The paint isn't brown.'

Sentences 30 and 31 would both promote *ne*-retention by virtue of the vowels (one nasal, the other not) sandwiching *ne*. For further discussion of this environment, see section 4.2.

Ashby also considered the influence of vowels of the same nasal characteristics sandwiching *ne*. Based on his findings (1981), the pattern

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[8] Sometimes the French artificially fill such a pause with *euh*, a word-like sound which can be extended indefinitely and which is roughly equivalent to the American gap-filling "ummmm." It is unclear from Ashby's discussion as to whether the *euh* would preclude the pausal nature of the would-be hole; it is suspected that the pause, be it *euh*-filled or not, would continue to promote *ne*-retention to the same degree in its immediate wake.

V *n'*V
[-nasal]   [-nasal]

corresponds to a *ne*-drop frequency of 65%. Consider an example of this variety of

intervocalic pattern:

(32)   *Le vendredi n'arrive jamais!*
[i n a]
V   + /n/ +   V
[-nasal]   [-nasal]
'Friday never arrives!'

No statistically significant conclusions could be drawn from the relative frequency of the

V *n'*V
[+nasal]   [+nasal]

pattern, in which *ne* was absent 3 of the 6 recorded instances (Ashby 1981):

(33)   *Les saints n'entendent rien.*
[_ _ n _ _]
V   + /n/ +   V
[+nasal]   [+nasal]
'The saints hear nothing.'

3.2   Syntactic variables

Ashby also considers the influence on *ne*-drop of numerous syntactic environments,

including lexicalized constructions, second negatives, clause type, verb type, noun

phrases, and emphatic adverbs.

3.2.1   Lexicalized constructions

First among the syntactic variables considered is the extreme lexicalization of a

few commonly used phrases. Ashby theorized that this process would be a potential

deterrent to *ne*-usage (1976, 1981). Several formulaic negative expressions are widely

used in French, including:

(34) *Je (ne) sais pas...*
      [ʃepa]
      'I don't know...'

(35) *Il (ne) faut pas...*
      [fopa]
      'It's not necessary...'

(36) *Il (n') y a pas...*
      [japa]
      'There aren't...'

(37) *Ce (n') est pas...*
      [sepa]
      'It isn't...'

Ne-loss is especially progressed in these circumstances; they do indeed disfavor the retention of *ne*. It is unsurprising, given the extreme reduction of everything to the left of *pas*, that the /n/ should get glossed over and consequently omitted as the expression itself becomes more and more lexicalized.

3.2.2 Second negatives

Another syntactic factor considered as motivation or hindrance to *ne*-drop was the variety of second negative. Although thus far only the forclusif widely mentioned has been *pas*, the French language actually lays claim to several different post-verbal negative particles. These second negatives, also known as forclusives, have traditionally served as the culminating half of the two-part French negative expressions, *ne...*<second negative>. French has many options for forclusives, including:

pas	'not'
plus	'no more, no longer'
que	'only'
rien	'nothing'
jamais	'never'
personne	'no one, nobody'
nul	'none, not any'
aucun	'none, not any'

ni...ni	'neither...nor'
guère	'hardly, barely, scarcely'
point	'not'

Of these numerous options, only a few are used with any regularity in productive environments. Some can be used in combination with another forclusif to add a more complex semantic nuance to the sentence. Consider sentence 38, in which *plus* and *jamais* are combined:

(38) *Je n'aurai <u>plus jamais</u> honte.*
'I will never anymore be ashamed.'

However, this multiple simultaneous use of second negatives is rather uncommon. Illustrating this fact and providing further clarification on forclusives, *Table 2* reinforces the notion that French has one hugely dominant second negative, *pas*.

Table 2. Percentages of second negatives (Ashby 1981)

pas	82.7
plus	4.5
que	4.1
rien	3.7
jamais	2.6
personne	0.7
2 or more	0.9
other	0.5
none	0.4

Ashby found that all but the *que* and *plus* second negatives disfavor the retention of *ne*. That *que* and *plus* slightly support the retention of *ne* may be motivated by their inability to be used elliptically (sentence 40), a common use of the forclusives *personne*, *jamais*, and *rien*.

(39) *Qui me déteste? —<u>Personne</u>.*
'Who hates me? —No one.'

(40) *Vous voulez de la soupe et du poisson? —<u>Plus</u>.
      'Do you want some soup and fish? —No more.'

(41) Vous voulez de la soupe et du poisson? —Je <u>n</u>'en veux <u>plus</u>.
      'Do you want some soup and fish? —I don't want any more.'

In sentence 39, the second negative *personne* is used elliptically to respond to a question. In contrast, sentence 40, which could be prompting for a response of 'no more,' cannot be answered with a mere *plus*. Instead, a more complete response must be provided, such as that in sentence 41.

Furthermore, *que* and *plus* are both homophonous and homographic with other commonly used words in French. As illustrated in sentence 42, *que* most often takes on the meaning 'that', a relative pronoun; likewise, as in sentence 43, *plus* frequently takes on the meaning 'more', a near opposite of the negative *plus* ('no more, no longer').

(42) Voila le fusil <u>que</u> Marc a laissé tomber par terre.
      'There is the gun that Marc dropped on the ground.'

(43) Quand il neige, il y a <u>plus</u> d'accidents.
      'When it snows, there are more accidents.'

Evidently, some confusion might result when these second negatives are used without their initializing *ne*. Consider sentences 44 and 45, situations in which, were *ne*-drop typical, one would have to wait until the full end of the sentence to know whether *Jean* functioned as object of the negative independent clause or as subject of a dependent clause.

(44) Je ne crois que Jean.
      'I only believe Jean.' (Ashby 1976)

(45) Je crois que Jean a raison.
      'I believe Jean is right.' (Ashby 1976)

While it is by no means impossible to understand the sense of (44) without its *ne*, dropping the preverbal negation here does create potential confusion which the French may prefer to avoid. However, since *ne* is already dropped 41% of the time in the case of *que*, and 49% of the time in the case of *plus* (Ashby 1981), it seems probable the French will eventually overcome their reluctance in these circumstances.

3.2.3   Clause type

Third among the syntactic considerations was clause type. In comparing negation between dependent and independent clauses, Ashby found that independent clauses, such as sentence 46, predominantly dropped the *ne* (70% omission) whereas the dependent clauses, such as sentences 47 through 50, in large part retained the *ne* (40% omission).

> *(46) Je ne t'aime pas.*
>   'I don't love you.'
>
> *(47) Je te déchire parce que tu ne m'aimes plus.*
>   'I am destroying you because you no longer love me.'
>
> *(48) Je suis la femme que tu n'aimes plus.*
>   'I am the woman that you no longer love.'
>
> *(49) Je te tue afin que tu ne me détestes plus.*
>   'I am killing you in order that you hate me no longer.'
>
> *(50) Je préfère ne pas aimer la vie.*
>   'I prefer not to love life.'

Further, more detailed investigation revealed that relative clauses such as sentence 48, subjunctive clauses such as sentence 49, and dependent infinitive clauses such as sentence 50 all slightly favor the retention of *ne* (Ashby 1981).

As a final note on clause type, all four negative imperatives encountered in this interview corpus retained their *ne* (Ashby 1981)[9].

    (51) Ne tuez pas!
        'Don't kill!'

    (52) Tuez!
        'Kill!'

    (53) *Tuez pas!
        'Don't kill!'

Comparing sentences 51 and 52 reveals one probable motivation for *ne*-retention in imperatives: a preverbal marker of negation might once again mean the difference between life and death. If a trigger-happy sharpshooter were given instructions phrased as in sentence 53, it is entirely possible that the target would already be dead before the postverbal negation could be uttered. This has long been an argument supporting the Neg First principle.

3.2.4   *Verb type*

A fourth potential syntactic variable, verb type, was also examined. This investigation first considered transitivity and then compared modals, auxiliaries, and main verbs.

Whether transitive, as in sentence 54, or intransitive, as in sentence 55, the verb was not found to greatly influence whether *ne*-retention or *ne*-deletion was favored (Ashby 1981).

    (54) Je n'ai pas frappé ma soeur.
        'I didn't hit my sister.'

    (55) Je n'ai pas assez travaillé pendant la semaine.
        'I didn't work enough during the week.'

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[9] Four negative imperatives is insufficient to draw statistically significant conclusions; nonetheless, 100% *ne*-retention, even in so small a category, suggests that very probably the retention rate is high.

The next consideration, however, use of modals, auxiliaries, or main verbs, was found to influence *ne*-drop patterns. According to Ashby (1981), the negative particle *ne* tends not to be retained with main verbs, as in sentence 56, or with the aspectual auxiliary *aller*, as in sentence 57.

> *(56) Céleste ne fait jamais la vaisselle.*
>   'Celeste never does the dishes.'

> *(57) Tu ne vas pas rester en bonne santé!*
>   'You're not going to stay in good health!'

Ne is retained about 1 time in 2 when *être* acts as auxiliary verb, *avoir* acts as auxiliary verb, or a modal is used.

> *(58) Il n'est pas tombé.*
>   'He didn't fall.'

> *(59) Il n'a pas choisi la bonne réponse.*
>   'He didn't pick the right answer.'

> *(60) Il ne doit pas réussir à l'examen.*
>   'He mustn't pass the test.'

3.2.5 *Clitics and subjects*

The next syntactic variable under examination was the role of the object clitics, which when preverbal are one of the following: *me*, *te*, *le*, *la*, *les*, *nous*, *vous*, *lui*, and *leur*.

> *(61) Je ne le comprends pas!*
>   'I don't understand it/him!'

According to Ashby, in French the object clitic is the only element, other than an adverb, which can be placed between *ne* and the verb[10], so it makes sense that an object clitic

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[10] Although Ashby appears to examine only the direct and indirect object clitics, two other clitics, *en* (often genitive) and *y* (often locative), can similarly split *ne* and the verb. *En* acts as a NP (sentence a), a PP (sentence b), or a VP (sentence c):

might motivate or discourage *ne*-drop. In fact, however, the presence of object clitics had no appreciable effect on *ne*-retention (Ashby 1981).

Ashby also investigated how the grammatical nature of the subject affects the pattern of *ne*-drop. Here, clitic subjects (*je*, *tu*, *il*, *elle*, *ce*, *on*, *nous*, *vous*, *ils*, and *elles*) correlated with a high degree of *ne*-drop, followed by non-clitic pronoun subjects (*cela*, 'that'; *quelqu'un,* 'someone'; etc.), then no surface subjects (imperatives, infinitives), and finally noun subjects (e.g. *l'oiseau*, 'the bird'). When the subject is a second negative, such as *personne* or *rien*, the *ne* is categorically retained (Ashby 1981).

Clitic subject
   (62) Je ne comprends pas!
       'I don't understand!'

Non-clitic pronoun subject
   (63) Quelqu'un n'a pas fini son dîner.
       'Someone hasn't finished his dinner.'

Lack of surface subject
   (64) N'ouvrez pas la boîte de Pandora!
       'Don't open Pandora's box!'

Noun subject
   (65) Le chat n'a pas trouvé l'oiseau à son goût.
       'The cat didn't find the bird to his taste.'

Second negative subject
   (66) Rien ne peut nous sauver!
       'Nothing can save us!'

   (a) *Veux-tu de la soupe? —Non, je n'en veux pas.*
       'Do you want some soup? —No, I don't want <u>any</u> (of it).'
   (b) *Tu as honte de tes notes? —Non, je n'en ai pas honte!*
       'Are you ashamed of your grades? —No, I'm not ashamed <u>of them</u>.'
   (c) *Tu as oublié de me téléphoner? —Non, je n'en ai pas oublié!*
       'You forgot to telephone me? —No, I didn't forget <u>to</u>!'
Y can be a locative (sentence d) or a VP (sentence e):
   (d) *Tu vas à Paris? —Non, je n'y vais pas.*
       'Are you going to Paris? —No, I'm not going <u>there</u>.'
   (e) *Tu résiste à fumer? —Non, je n'y résiste pas!*
       'Do you resist smoking? —No, I don't resist (<u>doing it</u>).'

3.2.6 Emphatic adverbs

Finally, the influence of reinforcing adverbs on *ne*-retention was examined. A strong correlation was evident between the presence of such an adverb and the retention of *ne* (Ashby 1976).

> *(67) Je ne veux <u>absolument</u> rien.*
> 'I want absolutely nothing.'

> *(68) Je ne mange rien <u>du tout</u>.*
> 'I eat nothing at all.'

When an individual focuses sufficient attention on the negative nature of a situation to add words in emphasis, he will probably also use those negation structures already available, as well.

3.3 Stylistic variables

Stylistically, at least two factors would seem to play roles in the frequency of *ne*-drop. In general, as a speaker achieves his comfort zone in a conversation he becomes increasingly likely to *ne*-drop. This is evidenced by the evolving pattern over the course of the interviews in Ashby's study (1981); during the latter half of the conversations, which were conducted by a stranger, the participants slightly increased their rate of *ne*-drop, from 63% to 65%. Similarly, formality plays a decisive role in a speaker's degree of *ne*-drop; Ashby notes a huge increase between a formal setting, at 65% *ne*-drop, and an informal setting, at 84% *ne*-drop (1981).

3.4 Demographic variables

The final category of variables considered by Ashby for its effect on *ne*-drop was demographics. In looking at age patterns, Ashby found the younger generation *ne*-drops most frequently. From a socioeconomic standpoint, less-educated, lower-level workers

retain the *ne* least frequently. Gender-wise, Ashby found females *ne*-drop more often (1981).

Although all these patterns indicate an interesting breakdown, the generation-based *ne*-drop data is of particular interest because it suggests where the future of this negative French particle may be going. That younger French are *ne*-dropping more than their parents bodes ill for the preservation of *ne* in their language. In fact, having collected more data twenty years after his earlier interview corpus, Ashby (2001) concludes that the generation differences in *ne*-usage is more than simply a generation-based preference for degree of *ne*-drop; the *ne* is definitely falling more and more out of usage in French.

3.5   Practical considerations

Sometimes, *ne*-retention may simply be based on practical considerations. In this vein of thought, Pohl considers that the medium of the telephone may help promote *ne*-retention (1975). This hypothesis, though based on his personal observations, was not rigorously tested. Such a phenomenon, should it truly exist, is likely a strategy for conveying a maximum amount of information in a restrictive verbal means. In face-to-face conversations, negative implications would be more evident to the audience than they are over the phone line. Awareness of the potential for communication difficulties may influence the French to use a higher, slightly more formal register in many phone conversations. Further research should be done in this area to determine to what extent *ne*-drop over the telephone might significantly differ from *ne*-drop in personal interviews.

4   HINDRANCES TO *NE*-DROP

Given the current state of *ne*-drop in French, there is no question of whether or not *ne* is falling from usage, merely a question of which environments will slow or stop its loss and what remnants of *ne* French will be left. In this section, both the syntactic and semantic constructions requiring the use of *ne* alone and the intervocalic phonological constraints on *ne*-drop are carefully dissected for their probable retarding effect on *ne*-loss in the immediate future.

4.1   *Ne* alone carries negativity

Ne can occur without a second negative in a few select circumstances; in these situations, the *ne* cannot easily be lost. Archaic expressions, constructions calling for agreement of negatives, and a subtle semantic usage of *ne* in isolation all still demonstrate a need for this negative particle.

4.1.1   Syntactic conditions

At present, *ne* serves as the only negative particle in several archaic constructions. These are holdovers from an earlier French era, when the simple proclitic *ne* alone was sufficient to indicate negation. Horn (1989:453) cites several examples[11], sentences 69 through 72.

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[11] It is interesting to note that two of these cited examples, (69) and (72), are in a parallel form typical as "textbook examples" of *ne*-drop (Ashby 1981). In those instances, they are derivatives of their more modern forms:

     (a) *je ~~ne~~ peux pas*
         'I can't'
     (b) *je ~~ne~~ sais pas*
         'I don't know'

Thus, French has at least three forms for these expressions: an archaic form, with *ne* the sole marker of negation; a grammatically accepted form, with the Académie Française's standard *ne...pas* embracing negation; and the common colloquial form, illustrating *ne*-drop and leaving the postverbal *pas* as the sole marker of negation.

(69) je ne peux
    'I can't'

(70) je ne saurais le dire
    'I wouldn't know how to say it'

(71) n'importe
    'no matter'

(72) je ne sais
    'I don't know'

In considering these fixed expressions, the *ne* is the only indication of negativity; *ne*-drop would result in a critical loss of semantic meaning because the *ne*-dropped negative form would be identical to the affirmative form.

*(73) *je ~~ne~~ peux*
    'I can't' / 'I can'

*(74) *je ~~ne~~ saurais le dire*
    'I wouldn't know how to say it' / 'I would know how to say it'

*(75) *~~n~~'importe*
    'no matter' / 'of import'

*(76) *je ~~ne~~ sais*
    'I don't know' / 'I know'

Next, *ne* is the only negative particle in certain constructions which require negative concord. In such an environment, the only currently acceptable negative marker that can be inserted is *ne*; so long as negative concord is still required and unless another negative particle evolves to take *ne*'s place, *ne* is absolutely necessary. The best examples of constructions requiring negative agreement are those of a negative subject, hypothesis, or doubt, all of which contain some nuances of negativity as confirmed by *ne* in combination with certain verbs.

(77) Personne ne veut y aller.
    'No one wants to go there.'

(78) Je crains que la classe ne commence jusqu'à sept heures.
       'I'm afraid class doesn't start until seven o'clock.'

(79) Je doute que la classe ne commence jusqu'à sept heures.
       'I doubt that class starts until seven o'clock.'

It is questionable whether in these circumstances *ne* is, in fact, the same word as the *ne* of

ne…pas. Ladusaw (1992) addresses this exact issue in a small section of his paper

"Expressing Negation." Suffice it to say, the use of *ne* in a circumstance such as this,

which calls for a negative polarity item, arguably does not constitute "productive usage"

of the negative particle. However, in this situation the *ne* does, by virtue of being a

negative polarity item, form a necessary agreement with a verb of doubt or hypothesis.

Thus, so long as *ne* continues to be used for negative agreement, it will continue

to have a role in conveying negativity in French. This *ne* does carry negative meaning,

and currently shows little sign of *ne*-drop[12], leading one to conclude that this *ne* will be

maintained, at least in the near future, in the French language.

4.1.2   Semantic conditions

In a more subtle usage of *ne* in isolation, consider the following pair of sentences:

(80) Je ne sais pas si vous l'avez vue.
       'I don't know if you've seen her.'

(81) Je ne sais si vous l'avez vue.
       'I don't know if you've seen her.'

In sentence 80, the speaker indicates nothing more than ignorance: "I don't know if

you've seen her." In sentence 81, on the other hand, further semantic meaning is woven

into the sentence. (81) may be suggesting that it is irrelevant whether or not you have

seen her, or that despite everything you will see her one day, or even that it is known that

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[12] When the subject is a second negative, according to Ashby (1981) the *ne* is retained 100% of the time.

you have seen her, just that circumstances surrounding that event are unclear (Laffay 1981). *Ne* in isolation, therefore, may be said to carry a delicate subjective meaning as opposed to the more objective meaning indicated by *ne...pas*. At present no alternative ways of so elegantly indicating this careful distinction exist; France would have no reason to allow the *ne* of this construction to fall from usage.

4.2   The Intervocalic *ne*

Phonologically, French strongly resists the vocal hiatus such as forms during *ne*-drop when the preceding word ends with a vowel and the following word begins with a vowel. This is particularly true when one or the other of those vowels is nasalized.

French already contains at least one example of an "artificial" insertion of a consonant in order to facilitate pronunciation[13]. Consider the case of inversion with a clitic subject such as *il*.

(82) *Il a la clé.*
'He has the key.'

(83) **A-il la clé?*
'Does he have the key?'

(84) *A-t-il la clé?*
'Does he have the key?'

French inversion allows many declarative statements (82) to be formed into interrogatives (83). The typical pattern for this is to reverse the order of the subject

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[13] French licenses another artificial consonant insertion, the addition of *l'* before some occurrences of *on*. This functions merely to prevent vulgarity. Compare sentences (a) and (b). In the first, the combination of *que* and *on* must be pronounced [k __], which is homophonous with the extremely vulgar *con*. To avoid associations with such vulgarity, the *on* is optionally preceded by *l'* in this environment.
    (a) *Voila la maison qu'on cherche.*
        'Over there is the house that we/you/one seek/s.'
    (b) *Voila la maison que l'on cherche.*
        'Over there is the house that we/you/one seek/s.'
Though this *l'* does not serve to satisfy a demonstrated phonological constraint, that another consonant can be artificially inserted in some situations reinforces the idea that French might maintain the negative particle *ne* as a consonant /n/ merely as a convenience to separate two vowels.

pronoun (or of the pronoun corresponding to the subject) and verb. However, in view of

the fact that several of the French subject pronouns begin with a vowel and the terminal

syllable of many conjugated French verbs lacks a coda, a vocal hiatus risks being created.

In this situation, French overcomes the phonological problem by inserting a "-*t*-" between

the verb and subject (84). It is possible that this *t* is a residual morpheme from the third

person singular Latin verb endings, which always concluded with *t* (Esposity 2002).

Given that French so strongly resists the vocal hiatus created when two vowels in

separate syllables are consecutive, it would not be surprising were French to retain the *ne*

(or, in this specific case, the *n'*) expressly to prevent such a phonologically awkward

construction. Consider examples 85 through 87. In the first, a liaison is preferred,

wherein the last consonant of *saints*, which otherwise would not be phonologically

realized, introduces the following syllable with a /z/. In 86, where the same sentence is

negated, the /z/ is absent but the negative marker *n'* (/n/) maintains the division between

the vowels. In sentence 87, however, when *ne*-drop has occurred, liaison between the last

letter of the subject and the beginning vowel of the verb is forbidden[14]. In French this

double vowel, while not impossible, is nonetheless awkward.

     (85)   *Les s<mark>aints_in</mark>spirent.*
                            [_ z _]
                'The saints inspire.'

     (86)   *Les s<mark>aints n'in</mark>spirent personne.*
                            [_ n _]
                'The saints inspire no one.'

     (87)   *Les s<mark>aints in</mark>spirent personne.*
                            [_ _]
                'The saints inspire no one.'

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[14] This was confirmed by native French speaker Stéphanie Losq, who pronounced the sentences as
presented and then volunteered the information (without prompting) that the liaison is forbidden in cases of
ne-drop.

Thus, even if the *ne* disappeared in all other *ne...pas* constructions, sufficient motivation for its retention in this environment should encourage its continued use, even if only as a fossil.

The research put forth by Ashby (1981) on inter-vowel *ne*-drop suggests, however, that the vocal hiatus may only create problems when one of the two vowels is nasalized. One should note that when neither vowel is nasalized, the interview subjects demonstrated *ne*-drop at approximately the same relative frequency as elsewhere in the corpus. Why, then, should the nasalization of one — and of only one — vowel promote a reluctance to *ne*-drop?

(88)   *La paix n'enrichit pas tous les pays.*
                    [_ n __]
                V   + /n/ +   V
              [-nasal]   [+nasal]
        'The peace isn't enriching all the countries.'

(89)   *Le peint n'attaque pas de sens.*
                    [__ n a]
                V   + /n/ +   V
              [+nasal]   [-nasal]
        'The paint doesn't attack the senses.'

Given that /n/ is a nasal consonant, strict phonological reasons may be dictating this perceived preference for *ne*-drop. Although creating a hiatus between two nasalized vowels or between two non-nasal vowels would be non-preferred, these two situations do not risk changing the meaning of the phrase through the contamination of phonological spreading. The [+nasal] characteristic could not "spread" to the other [+nasal] vowel, or the [-nasal] characteristic "spread" to the other [-nasal] vowel. On the other hand, when one vowel is [+nasal] and the other is [-nasal], maintaining a division between the two could be critical to prevent loss of word-distinguishing characteristic.

As an alternative interpretation, that /n/ is a nasalized consonant may be facilitating, not dictating, its retention between the [+nasal] and [-nasal] vowels. Physiologically, movement from a [+nasal] vowel to a [-nasal] vowel or the reverse is scarcely interrupted by pausing to form an /n/. /n/, as a nasalized consonant, offers a convenient alternative to the hiatal pause by virtue of being as an extremely convenient stopping place on the way to or from nasalization.

In any case, the phonological constraints inherent in producing two consecutive vowel sounds, one of which is nasalized, may prove sufficient to retain the *ne* in everyday French usage, though this *ne*-usage may be restricted to existence as a fossil, not a true carrier of negativity. Justification for this carefully-defined situation is evidenced by the *-t-* artificially maintained to prevent a vocal hiatus in questions formed by inversion.

5   CONCLUSIONS

The *ne*-drop phenomenon, though it first appeared approximately five hundred years ago, has recently become extremely widespread. Over a twenty year period from 1976 to 1995, the average relative frequency of *ne*-drop in the Tours region of France increased from 68% to an incredible 82% (Ashby 1981, 2001). Evidence suggests that *ne*, as a productive marker of French negation, is on its way out.

This loss of a marker of negation is by no means a new process; Jespersen's Cycle effectively describes the continual evolution of negative particles over the course of a language's lifetime. In French, the postverbal *pas* has largely replaced *ne*, in most environments, as the productive marker of negativity. As *ne* continues to play a smaller

and smaller role as a negative particle in the near future, *pas* will become subject to the same evolutionary effects that have helped describe *ne*'s rise and fall. Because French is a VO language and *pas* is a postverbal negative particle, it is probable that, as suggested by Schwegler (1983), the Neg First principle will not be able to budge *pas* from its position to move it leftward of the verb; instead, *pas* will likely be fused with emphasizers over time.

Where, then, does that leave *ne*? Based on the analysis presented in section 4, a solid argument has been put forth that the negative preverbal particle *ne* of standard French will not, in the immediate future, fall entirely out of usage. *Ne* will probably be retained for some time as a stylistic variant, as has occurred in the French of Montréal. Even beyond that stage, *ne* will probably be retained as a nonproductive negative polarity item in those semantic and syntactic constructions which rely on negative concord or on *ne* as the sole marker of negativity. Furthermore, *ne* may well be retained in the intervocalic environment in order to prevent those non-preferred vocal hiatuses which French goes to such great lengths to avoid. In this environment, *ne* would be only a fossil, having lost all sense of negativity but necessary either because the liaison between subject and negative verb is forbidden or simply because no other consonant is available to fill in and prevent the threatened hiatus.

Thus, *ne* is in the process of losing to *pas* the negative meaning it has historically carried. Nonetheless, it will not, in the near future, entirely disappear from French. Its loss will be significantly slowed in a very few, well-defined environments.

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