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# From Old French to French: Language as a living puzzle

**Marc Olivier**

Supervised by: Dr. Christina Sevdali  
& Prof. Raffaella Folli

This literature review of clitic placement is a comparison of Old French and Modern French word order; the former being nearly a thousand years older than the latter. Through the evolution of different syntactic phenomena such as clitic climbing, null-object, null-subject and restructuring, I show that a language is alive and not linear; it grows and evolves in creative ways in order to preserve harmony in its structure. Different reorganisations took place in French, and pieces of the language have moved in order to avoid syntactical conflicts.

*Keywords: Old French, generative syntax, clitics, restructuring, diachrony, Romance Languages, comparative syntax, word order*

## 1. Introduction

1. Parts of this paper are based on issues previously discussed in a master's dissertation (Olivier, 2018).

2. *Base de Français Médiéval* corpus.

Under the scope of the generative syntax framework, this paper<sup>1</sup> aims to provide a rich insight of the diachrony of French, focusing on clitic placement and restructuring effects. A comparison of Old French with Modern French allows us to highlight the hidden structure of the language. In Romance languages, accusative and dative nouns can be replaced by clitics, i.e. weak elements that are unstressed, therefore a stressed form (a verb) hosts them. Clitics have a peculiar place, which may refute linearity in the language: the different constraints of French have shown to impact the position of clitics throughout its evolution, losing freedom in word order and reorganising the whole puzzle. When relevant, I will use examples from the *Queste del Saint Graal*<sup>2</sup> (ca. 1225).

## 2. Chronology of the French Language

France was occupied by Gaulish tribes that spoke Celtic languages until the territory was conquered by the Romans in 52 BC. Latin has become the official language and was implemented everywhere to such an extent that by the end of the fifth century, Vulgar Latin was the only spoken language (Rickard, 1974). Old French (henceforth, OF) descends from a Vulgar Latin form and is a vernacular language that takes its origins in Northern regions of France – where the *Langues d'oïl* were spoken, as opposed to the *Langues d'oc* in the south. Its earlier record comes from the Oaths of Strasbourg in 842. OF gives birth to Middle French around the mid-fourteenth century – when changes are attested or are ongoing. It is agreed that from the mid-seventeenth century, the form of French spoken becomes very similar to Modern French (henceforth, ModF). Very few texts before the twelfth century have survived, therefore the understanding of OF we have is mostly based on texts from the late period of OF. During the last thousand years, the syntax of French has undergone different reorganisations.

## 3. Word order:

Verb-second: OF is a language that allows Verb Second (V2) in both main and embedded clauses (Labelle, 2007 and Mathieu, 2009). The V2 parameter allows different word orders such as OVS or SVO, as long as the verb holds the second

position (see (1)a). Mathieu (2012) goes further in his analysis of OF and argues that V3 and V4 should also have been possible. With the evolution of the language, the structure becomes more rigid, and these features are not possible in ModF, where the order is strictly restricted to SVO (see (1)b).

3. In each example, clitics and objects are underlined, main verbs are italicised and infinitives are in bold.

(1)a. De ce, fet ele, vos *conseillera*i je au mielz que je porré<sup>3</sup> / For this, she says, I will advise you as best as I will be able to.  
(*Queste del Saint Graal*, 178c, 3-4, ca. 1225)  
b. ... je vous *conseillera*i...

(2)a. Vostre terre qui *Ø* *defandra*? / Your land, who will defend (it)?  
(*Chanson de Lyon* 1617, Arteaga 1998)  
b. Vostre terre, qui la *défendra*?

Null-object parameter: In losing V2, French has also lost its null-object parameter (Arteaga, 1998). Clitic objects can be omitted in OF when they appear in a coordinated structure or a second clause (see (2)a, and (2)b for a ModF equivalent).

4. Old French subjects are not clitics; yet, they are in Modern French (Kayne, 1975).

Null-subject parameter: The object is not the only word that can be omitted in OF, since, like most Romance languages, OF has a rich verbal inflexion system and can omit the subject <sup>4</sup> (see (3)a, and (3)b for a ModF equivalent): this is still true for Italian and Spanish, but French has lost this feature (Vance, 1997).

(3)a. Lors les *meine* *Ø* *andeus* en sa chapele / Then he leads them both into his chapel.  
(*Queste del Saint Graal*, 197a, 10, ca. 1225)  
b. Puis il les *mène* tous les deux dans sa chapelle.

Person-case constraint: Anagnostopoulou (2005) claims that French is marked by the Person-Case Constraint (PCC, also called *me-lui* constraint by Bonet (1991)): this constraint prevents first and second person accusative clitics from occurring before a dative one. On the other hand, a third person accusative can co-occur with a first-person dative clitic. ModF holds the Strong Version of the PCC, i.e. the accusative clitic precedes the dative one (ACC-DAT), unless the latter is a first or a second person. This is not true for OF, as pointed at by Salvesen (2013), who provides an example (4)a from the twelfth century with a first person, with its ModF equivalent (4)b.

(4)a. et il la me *dona* / and he gave it to me.  
(*Graal*, 6677, Salvesen 2013)  
b. et il me la *donna*.

OF shows a strong preference for the order ACC-DAT, whether the clitics are object pronouns or reflexive pronouns, first, second or third persons. In his *Old French Grammar*, Johnston (1900) argues that this construction comes from Latin, a language in which the direct object appears sometimes before the indirect object, and sometimes the indirect object comes first. However, he argues that OF is particular since Old Spanish and Old Italian have chosen the other option from Latin, i.e. the order DAT-ACC. Nevertheless, this is not the only context where the clitic has a different place from its ModF equivalent, as seen with restructuring.

Restructuring: Rizzi (1982) describes restructuring as the transformation of a biclausal structure into a monoclausal one, which creates a verbal complex: the infinitive moves out of its clause and incorporates with the main verb. One of the results of restructuring is that the clitic leaves the infinitive in order to be hosted preverbally by the main verb; or the object might leave the infinitival clause and moves up to the matrix one (i.e. long object movement). Even though a language displays restructuring, it does not apply to every verb<sup>5</sup> (therefore, the clitic cannot climb, or the object remains in the embedded clause). One clear example of clitic climbing (henceforth, CC) is Italian where restructuring is illustrated in (5)c : the

5. In Italian, only modal, aspectual and motion verbs undergo restructuring (Rizzi, 1978); and this is identical in Middle French (Martineau, 1990).

noun appears at the right of the infinitive (5)a, the clitic may do the same (5)b, or climb and be proclitic (i.e. preverbal) on the main verb (5)c (Pearce 1990).

(5)a. *Voglio lavare* la macchina.  
 b. *Voglio lavarla*.  
 c. La *voglio lavare* / I want to wash the car / it.

(6)a. Mes ele ne la *pot veoir* /  
 But she cannot see her.  
 b. Mais elle ne *peut la voir*.

Roberts (1997) uses the negative adverbs *più* and *pas* to show that in restructuring contexts, Italian infinitives go higher than French ones, and he highlights the absence of Italian-like restructuring in ModF<sup>6</sup>. When restructuring occurs, Italian infinitives are before *più*, whereas French infinitives are always after *pas*. Regarding OF, he shows that infinitives could occur before *pas* and states that restructuring in OF is similar to restructuring in Italian. This feature of the language has been lost, and infinitive-movement is not allowed anymore.

6. Cinque (2002) identifies other realisations of restructuring in Modern French, such as quantifier climbing, en and y climbing, long movement in 'easy to please' constructions, and adverb climbing.

Clitic climbing: OF is known to be a language that undergoes restructuring (6a, examples from Martineau, 1990; *above*), since it allows CC, i.e. the clitic leaves the infinitive and gets hosted by the main verb. On the other hand, the ModF equivalent (6)b does not allow the clitic to leave the infinitival clause, and thus remains proclitic on the latter. Nonetheless, CC still occurs in certain contexts in ModF; Martineau (1990) states that causative and perception verbs allow it, such as *faire*, 'make', or *voir*, 'see'.

Clitic placement in infinitival non-restructuring contexts in Old French: When restructuring does not apply, the clitic cannot climb to the higher clause and remains hosted by the infinitive. In Italian, it remains enclitic, i.e. postverbal. Roberts (1997) claims that when CC is not possible, the clitic remains a postverbal pronoun that is fully stressed and does not need to be hosted by the verb (also, an adverb can intervene); and this is not found in Italian. In other words, the pronominal object is a strong form that remains in the lower clause. However, in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the clitic behaves either similarly as Italian (7)<sup>7</sup>, or it is a strong pronoun and appears preverbally (8), or it behaves like ModF (9) i.e. preverbal. These examples are from the *Base de Français Médiéval* corpus, and I provide the English translations. In the three following examples, ModF equivalents would have proclisis (like in (9)).

7. Enclisis on infinitive is only present in Early Old French and disappears before the Middle French period (De Kok, 1985).

(7) Il tent la main por **prendre** la / He stretches out his hand to take it.

(8)... mes volentez de **lessier** moi veoir.../ [you accomplished (for me)] my will to let me see [what I always wanted]

(9)...et se j'ai pooir de l'**amender** je le vos amenderai volentier/...and if I have the power to repair it, I will be glad to repair it for you.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper presents evidence of changes in the diachrony of French in comparing OF and ModF word order. The structural reorganisation shows that languages do not have a linear construction but are rather a puzzle in which pieces may switch positions in the course of time. The inconsistency of the language structure after a thousand years of evolution demonstrates the perpetual reorganisation in order to create meaningful harmonies, with a domino-effect where one change gives rise to others. Yet, placement of clitics in infinitival non-restructuring clauses seems to be less rigid and more diversified in OF. More research on the latter observation would allow us to understand OF word order better, and the mechanisms that entail these orders.

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