



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *The influence of linguistic and social factors on the recent decline of French ne* .

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/1006/>

---

**Article:**

Armstrong, N. and Smith, A. (2002) The influence of linguistic and social factors on the recent decline of French ne. *Journal of French Language Studies*, 12 (1). pp. 23-41. ISSN 1474-0079

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959269502000121>

---

**Reuse**

See Attached

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## *The influence of linguistic and social factors on the recent decline of French ne*

NIGEL ARMSTRONG AND ALAN SMITH

*University of Leeds*

(Received July 2000; revised March 2001)

### ABSTRACT

In this article we present some results showing the decline in radio speech in the use of the French negative particle *ne* over the last forty years or so. These results derive from a comparison of two radio corpora: an archival corpus recorded by Ågren (1973) in 1960–61. The second, contemporary corpus was recorded and analysed by one of the present authors (Smith) in 1997. Having described the variable in question, we present these corpora in turn and analyse results deriving from them. We then examine some of the linguistic constraints that endorse the progressive decline of *ne* in some contexts while hindering the process in others. Finally we consider some elements of the social context within which the decline of *ne* has been occurring.

### I VARIABLE DELETION OF FRENCH *NE*

As Coveney remarks (1996: 55), the presence or absence of *ne* is ‘possibly the best known sociolinguistic variable in contemporary French’. Several scholars have reported on variable realisation of *ne* in the French of France, the variety we examine here, and we summarise their findings in section 4 below. Given the fairly well known character of *ne* deletion, it seems sufficient to state briefly here that standard French can express negation through the ‘embracing’ structure that most commonly comprises pre-verbal *ne*, verb form, plus one of several post-verbal items: *pas*, *jamais*, *plus*, *rien*, and *personne* are the most frequent. Examples are given in Table 1 below. The issue here is of course that everyday spoken French very largely has no *ne*, relying instead on the negative items listed above, which are more salient than *ne* by reason of being capable of receiving phrase-final stress. As we will see below, more monitored varieties of French have a higher level of *ne* retention. In addition to these negative items, the restrictive adverb *que* is also frequent; this lexical item is not found phrase-finally, but can receive stress in sequences such as: ‘ceux qui (ne) font *que* français’.

Both the reasons for the decline of *ne* in speech and the period when its variable deletion became widespread are matters of some debate. Ayres-Bennett (1994) has suggested that *ne* deletion may have been relatively widespread as far back as the seventeenth century, reflecting a pattern of age

*Nigel Armstrong and Alan Smith*

grading as well as differentiation between social classes, concluding (1994: 81) ‘there is very little conclusive evidence to support the hypothesis that *ne* was *generally* absent from popular speech in the seventeenth century, although the lack of evidence does not prove it was generally present [. . .]’. Pohl argues on the other hand that, although the dropping of *ne* began several centuries ago, it became widespread at a later date, in Pohl’s view (based on reproductions of popular speech in literature) between 1820 and 1850. We are not concerned directly here with the time depth of *ne* deletion, but note that there appears to be no *a priori* reason to prevent the relatively abrupt decline of a variable that had hitherto been receding gradually from a language.

## 2 CORPORA

### 2.1 *The archival corpora*

Ågren’s corpora were recorded from two radio programmes then being broadcast on French public service radio: *Tribune de Paris* and *Club de jeunes*. *Tribune de Paris* featured debates on topics such as politics, the economy, sport, literature, and the theatre, with guests chosen for their specialist knowledge. *Club de jeunes* consisted of investigations, discussions, interviews and presentations on subjects likely to be of interest to young people. The speakers in the 1960–61 corpus were mostly well-educated journalists, writers and politicians. The recordings were used by Ågren as the basis for a study of French variable liaison (Ågren, 1973).

So as to guarantee the spontaneity of the French spoken, Ågren did not take any account of speech where there was the slightest suspicion that the speaker was reading from a text or manuscript. With the same idea in mind of considering only conversational French, the presenters’ opening remarks were disregarded, as were announcements of forthcoming programmes. Furthermore, in order to obtain a corpus of ‘pure’ French, speech by non-native speakers was excluded from the study. Since it is not clear how Ågren was able to verify the native origins of speakers, no effort at making such a distinction between native and non-native speakers has been attempted in the modern corpus. However, Ågren’s practice of disregarding obviously scripted speech has been followed.

### 2.2 *The contemporary corpus*

The present-day French corpus was taken from the public service radio programme *Le Téléphone sonne*, a current-affairs ‘phone-in’ feature. The subject matter in Ågren’s programmes was rather weighted in favour of the cinema, the theatre and literature, whereas the programme from which the modern French corpus is drawn is overwhelmingly concerned with current affairs. The two corpora are nevertheless broadly comparable in terms

### *The recent decline of French ne*

of the seriousness of the topics discussed, as well as of the occupational and educational levels of the participants.

*Le Téléphone sonne* is a discussion programme featuring guests invited for their specialised knowledge. It is broadcast on *France Inter*, a serious public-service channel. The programme lasts 40 minutes and is currently broadcast live four days a week. Listeners are invited to telephone the radio to ask questions or make comments over the air, or else communicate by fax or Minitel. Although the show is open to members of the public, the participation of listeners is rather superficial, since it is normally restricted to asking just one question. It is very rare that callers are asked to pass any further comment following a reply to their question. Also, guests seldom address a caller directly, usually referring to them in the third person. This demonstrates that the role of the public is less to participate meaningfully in the programme than to provide material for discussion. It shows also that speakers are addressing their audience as a whole, rather than the caller.

Thirty programmes were recorded over the period 27 May – 29 August 1997, totalling just over 20 hours of speech. Where a particular programme departed from the usual format, it was excluded from the corpus. The whole of this corpus was transcribed orthographically, excluding the telephoned speech of listeners. Occasionally, guests on the show were not present in the studio but spoke via a telephone link. No attempt was made to distinguish between this category of guest and the rest since all speakers were aware that they were addressing a radio audience live. Some minor difficulties did arise in transcribing the speech of guests speaking via telephone because of the sometimes rather poor sound quality, but in any event any gaps in the transcription constitute an insignificantly small portion of the data under consideration.

For brevity, the French corpus from 1960/1 is referred to below as ‘Ågren’, while the abbreviation ‘TS’ refers to the 1997 *Le Téléphone sonne* corpus.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 *Analysis of the TS corpus*

There were few difficulties connected with the identification of tokens of negative expressions and their classification. However, we may mention briefly the perceptual problem discussed by several scholars, concerning tokens of *ne* that were located where the indefinite pronoun *on* was followed by a negated verb beginning with a vowel, as in *on (n') a pas le temps*. This is of course because *ne* reduces to /n/ standardly before a vowel, as in the preceding example. At the same time liaison is near invariable in *on*, so that the /n/ is almost always pronounced. In both cases, the pronunciation would be [ʒnapaltũ], although in very careful speech *ne* retention could be signalled by lengthening of /n/, so that the pronunciation would be [ʒnnapaltũ]. Following the practice of several scholars (most recently Coveney, 1996: 66), tokens

were excluded in this context in view of the difficulty of determining with certainty the presence or absence of *ne*. As Coveney remarks, speakers may occasionally signal the presence of *ne* in these contexts in a relatively easily perceptible way, perhaps most often through a lengthened /n/, but no such instances were noted in the present corpora.

A further minor problem occurred in tokens where a negative item was followed by an infinitive, as in *je préfère ne pas le voir* ‘I prefer not to see him’. Coveney discounted these tokens on the grounds that *ne* and the clitic pronoun are not adjacent, unlike in the rest of the tokens. Whereas no such tokens occurred in the TS data, there were 12 examples in Ågren’s data. In all of them *ne* was retained. Following Coveney’s practice, these tokens were also excluded.

No examples were recorded of omitted *il* in negated verb phrases, as in *faut pas s’en inquiéter* (rather than *il ne faut pas s’en inquiéter*) and *γ a pas de quoi se creuser la tête* (instead of *il n’γ a pas de quoi se creuser la tête*). This is of course a common feature of popular speech but is much less frequent in educated speech, as its absence from the corpora reported here makes plain.

Apart from these cases, calculation of *ne*-retention rates simply followed the standard method of dividing actual by potential realisations of tokens of *ne*. Figures for *ne* retention were then compared for each linguistic context under consideration. The classification of the tokens was modelled on Coveney’s study (1996) as follows, according to subject: (i) clitic; (ii) non-clitic; (iii) subjectless expressions; (iv) negative item (*pas, jamais, rien* etc.); and (v) non-subject proclitic (i.e. object pronouns). These five criteria are exemplified in Table 1 below, with the element used as a criterion of classification italicised.

Table 1. *Linguistic elements used to classify loci of ne retention*

(i) Clitic subject
<i>on ne va pas vous accabler de chiffres</i> <i>nous ne nageons pas en pleine utopie</i>
(ii) Non-clitic subject
<i>ça ne frappe pas que les pays les plus pauvres</i> <i>qui ne fait que creuser l’inégalité entre les hommes et les femmes</i>
(iii) Subjectless expression
<i>ne soyez pas trop durs</i> (imperative) <i>ils avaient l’air de ne rien dire</i> (infinitive) <i>comme n’étant pas du tout le retour en arrière</i> (present participle)
(iv) Negative item
<i>elles ne partent jamais du bas</i> <i>sinon, ça n’a rien changé</i>
(v) Non-subject clitic
<i>on n’en peut mais</i> <i>ça ne me paraît pas une bonne chose</i>

## *The recent decline of French ne*

### *3.2 Statistical analysis and presentation of results*

Wherever a comparison is made below between the frequency of *ne* deletion in the Ågren and TS corpora, a chi-square test has been applied, which not only determines whether differences between the two corpora are statistically significant but also helps to rank the differences in a hierarchy. The chi-square test is non-parametric; that is, no assumptions are made about the patterning of the use of a variable in the population as a whole in terms of a 'normal' distribution. Rather, the chi-square test makes possible statements about the reliability of the sample (Rowntree, 1981: 124–7). The reason for using a non-parametric test is that the variable of interest here is not distributed 'normally' among the speech community; indeed, several studies have shown that non-realisation of *ne* in negative expressions is very largely the norm among native French speakers. On the other hand, as would be expected of prestigious linguistic features, high levels of use of *ne* are found chiefly in the speech of the higher social classes, the well educated and in speech uttered on formal occasions, as here. We discuss in a subsequent section the relation between speech used on the radio and that characteristic of the wider community.

As is conventional in the social sciences, significance in the results reported here was tested at 'the five per cent level'; that is, a result was accepted as being statistically significant if it is shown that the probability ( $p$ ) of its occurring by chance is equal to or less than one in twenty, or 5% ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Similarly, significance at the 1% level is described as highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) and at the 0.1% level as very highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

It should be noted that in the relevant 'Totals' rows in the results tables presented below, which show the actual figures from the present study, there is in some cases a row representing 'adjusted' figures from the modern corpora. This additional row appears where the differences between the frequency of variables within the archival corpus is significant at least at the 5% level according to the chi-square test. These adjusted figures show what the frequencies would have been had the proportions of the various categories (shown in the first column) in the 'TS' corpus been the same as they were in the archival corpus. Thus the adjusted totals give a more realistic indication of any significant differences in frequencies between the two corpora. It will be seen, however, that in most cases the differences between actual and adjusted figures are negligible.

## 4 PREVIOUS STUDIES OF *NE*

As mentioned above, several scholars have reported on deletion of *ne* in the French of France, as well as on Canadian French. Although the overall rates of *ne* deletion differ rather widely between studies, the results nevertheless demonstrate a pattern of variable realisation of *ne* that correlates with linguistic and social variables. Specifically, the patterns observable in the literature

suggest that along the social-group or interspeaker dimensions of linguistic variation, *ne* is a grammatical variable of the type that clearly responds to a variationist analysis; that is, the variable occurs frequently enough for speakers to be able to employ in a probabilistic way (albeit at low levels in everyday speech) the (non)standard variant to signal various aspects of their social identity: their age, gender, social class, etc. Further to this is of course that the standard variant is used with greater frequency by more linguistically conservative speakers (broadly older, some female, middle-class) and this reflects the overt prestige associated with the presence of *ne*, perhaps principally by virtue of its invariable use in conservative written varieties of French. Gadet (2000) has a recent and critical conspectus of studies of *ne*, but for convenience we show in Table 2 below a summary in chronological order of most of the available findings.

Table 2. Summary of previous quantitative studies of *ne* deletion

Author	Year of survey	Research site	Number of tokens	% <i>ne</i> retention
Pohl 1968	early 1950s	Belgium/France	5308	61.9
Sankoff and Vincent 1980	1971	Montreal	<10,000	0.5
Ashby 1976	1967–8	Paris	1029	55.8
Diller 1983	1975	Béarn	641	65.7
Ashby 1981	1976	Tours	2818	36.6
Coveney 1996	1980	Somme	2932	18.8
Moreau 1986	1982/3	Belgium	3158	50.2
Pooley 1996	1983	Roubaix	3719	7
Armstrong 2002	1990	Lorraine	2501	1.8
Pooley 1996	1995	Rouge-Barres (Nord)	391	1
Ashby 2001	1995	Tours	1593	15.7

All of the studies summarised above concern European French, except Sankoff and Vincent (1980), which reported on Montreal French. We include this result to illustrate the striking disparity between the two sets of varieties. Sankoff and Vincent's results indicate that *ne* deletion is overwhelmingly the norm in Canadian French. Concerning the European French findings, one can safely say that the rather large degrees of variation in the levels of *ne* retention reported are due to the social characteristics of the speakers sampled, as well as the speech situations in which the corpora were recorded. For instance, Diller's informants were southern rural speakers, while Moreau's corpus derived from radio speech. The lowest retention rate in non-Canadian French (Armstrong, 2002) concerns school pupils from Lorraine aged 11–19 (Gadet (2000) reports 3% in two young *banlieue* speakers). Most other results concern adult speakers, except those presented by Pohl (analysed in the Gougenheim *et al français fondamentale* corpus), which included some children.

### *The recent decline of French ne*

Pooley (1996: 276) points out the need for caution in interpreting the lower use of *ne* in the second corpus he recorded, which was separated by a 12-year interval from the first, and is therefore capable of being interpreted as a real-time result. As Pooley remarks, the first speaker sample was composed of adults, the second of adolescents, so that an age-grading difference may well be in question here, rather than progressive change.

The results which do provide direct information on change in progress in the use of *ne* are Ashby's 1976 and 1995 studies of negation in Tours speech, which suggest that *ne* is disappearing from everyday spoken French. In 1995 Ashby returned to Tours and replicated as far as possible his 1976 study (Ashby, 1981) so as to determine whether a change in *ne* retention had occurred in Tours speech in 'real time' in the intervening 19 years. A total of 1593 tokens of potential *ne* retention were collected from 25 informants. The particle was retained in 250 of these, resulting in a 15.7% retention rate, in comparison with the 36.6% retention rate in the 1976 study. Ashby classified his tokens according to full noun phrase subjects, subjectless expressions, stressed and clitic pronouns. In each case substantial declines in *ne* retention were recorded.

Ashby notes a convergence between men and women in Tours in *ne* retention. In 1976, the retention rate for men was 42% while for women it was 30%. In 1995, the retention rate for both sexes was 16%. This seems to conform with other changes in progress recently reported where female speakers are advanced relative to male (Milroy, Milroy, Hartley and Walshaw, 1994; Armstrong and Unsworth, 1999). Regarding internal linguistic constraints, Ashby found *ne* deletion to be more frequent with subject pronouns (especially *je*, *il* and *ce*); when the second negative marker is *pas*; and in frequent collocations.

To judge by Ashby's most recent study, it seems that the decline of *ne* has not proceeded at a uniform rate but has become rather steeper in recent times. This finding is consonant with the post-war decline in the esteem of traditional linguistic norms that we discuss in further detail below.

## 5 RESULTS

In each of the tables below displaying the results of the study on *ne* retention, the figures from Ågren's corpus are presented followed by the corresponding figures from the modern corpus. The columns headed '+ ne' show the number of tokens of *ne* realised, the columns headed '- ne' the number not realised. A chi-square test was applied to every difference between the archival and the modern corpora. The chi-square value shown below the figures being compared is given only where there is a significant difference. Since *ne* deletion is overwhelmingly the norm in most types of language, we refer below to *ne* retention rather than *ne* deletion. The percentages in the results presented in the following section are therefore for rates of *ne* retention. As is

Table 3. Overall results of *ne* retention

	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
All tokens	2404	191	92.6	1498	568	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					

conventional, percentage results that derive from very small token numbers are shown in parentheses.

The overall results shown in Table 3 above display a decline in *ne* retention in the TS corpus compared with the Ågren corpus that is quite marked – 72.5% from 92.6% – as well as very highly significant statistically. Clearly, these overall results conceal much variation according to linguistic context. We present now the results of *ne* retention according to the five criteria shown in Table 1 above. For ease of comparison, the overall results shown above are appended to the bottom of each of the tables below.

### 5.1 Rates of *ne* retention with clitic subject of the negated verb

The results presented below show rates of *ne* retention according to the clitic subject of the negated verb. The pronouns are presented in descending order of the levels of *ne* retention associated with each in the TS corpus. Table 4 shows a reduction in *ne* retention between the two corpora for every subject apart from *elles* and *tu*, for which the number of tokens collected are too few for robust comparisons to be made. Particularly noteworthy declines can be seen for *on* (26.4%), *je* (30.1%), *ce* (39.2%) and *il* (23.6%). Ashby suggests that the low rate of *ne* retention with these subject pronouns is connected with their high frequency in speech. In this connexion we can point out the tendency in French, frequently noted (e.g. Harris, 1988: 231–2), for clitic subject pronouns to occur even where there is already an NP subject elsewhere in the sequence. Harris suggests that this process has come about as a result of the non-contrastive character of most French present-tense verb paradigms, owing to the fact that five out of the seven verb forms are homophonous. This homophony has resulted in the cliticisation of the conjunctive personal pronouns, at least in non-formal speech, so as to ensure contrast of person. Harris states that:

[. . .] we may regard French *ils aiment* [izem] ‘they love’ as one polymorphemic word (subject-prefix + stem) in exactly the same way as one regards Latin *AMANT*, or Old French *aiment*, as one polymorphemic word (stem + subject suffix).

Against Harris’s view, it should be pointed out that an interpretation of *ils aiment* as ‘one polymorphemic word’ is contradicted by the fact that the sequence can be interrupted, although only by other pronouns and of course

The recent decline of French *ne*

Table 4. Retention of *ne* according to subject (clitic pronouns)

Subject	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
elles	8	0	(100)	7	0	(100)
tu	8	1	(88.9)	2	0	(100)
elle	50	3	94.3	22	2	91.7
nous	101	0	100	49	9	84.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 16.60$ , 1 d.f.)					
vous	58	3	95.1	32	8	80.0
Significance	p < 0.05 ( $\chi^2 = 5.66$ , 1 d.f.)					
ils	59	3	95.2	53	15	77.9
Significance	p < 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 8.06$ , 1 d.f.)					
on	165	14	92.2	123	64	65.8
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 38.02$ , 1 d.f.)					
il	389	47	89.2	242	127	65.6
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 65.90$ , 1 d.f.)					
je	427	55	88.6	158	112	58.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 90.58$ , 1 d.f.)					
ce	140	40	77.8	92	147	38.6
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 64.15$ , 1 d.f.)					
Totals	1405	166	89.4	780	484	61.7
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 304.70$ , 1 d.f.)					
Adjusted	1405	166	89.4	807	457	63.8
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 267.48$ , 1 d.f.)					
All tokens	2404	191	92.6	1498	568	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					

*ne*. Harris's analysis is presented from a typological viewpoint suggesting a synthetic–analytic–synthetic cycle from Old to Modern French.

A different perspective is provided by Vendryes (1921: 103) who points out the tendency, in colloquial French and in other languages, to group grammatical or morphemic information leftwards in a sentence, and lexical information rightwards. He has the following interrogative example:

(1) il l'a-ti jamais attrapé, le gendarme, son voleur?

where, as Vendryes expresses it, 'les données abstraites sont mises en tête, et, en queue, les données concrètes'. This type of construction tends to attract disapproval because of its apparently pleonastic structure. Redundancy is nevertheless a central feature of natural language, and the organisation exemplified in (1) of grammatical information (tense, person, number, inter-

rogation) through the use mostly of monomorphemic words which are then amplified incrementally, is in conformity with the ‘end focus’ principle that groups important or new information rightwards. These remarks apply also to the negative counterpart to the interrogative example shown above:

(2) il [n'] l'a jamais attrapé, le gendarme, son voleur?

Similarly, Armstrong (2002: 162) has the following example of insertion of *ne* by a 19-year-old female speaker in a relatively formal speech style (interview with male fieldworker):

(3) personne ne l'a encore fait

This sentence could well in more informal speech have been organised using clitic + verb, as:

(4) il [n'] y a personne qui l'a encore fait

Here again the sequence begins in principle with a subject clitic, even if in everyday speech the pronoun in *il y a* is rarely realised. In this example the *il y a* sequence can be thought of as a presentative construction, rather than (or as well as) a sequence grouping together grammatical as opposed to lexical information, but as in examples (1) and (2) the tendency is towards displacement in colloquial speech of the locus for *ne* leftwards, and association of the *ne* locus with a clitic + verb sequence, rather than with verb + full lexical item.

A further constraint influencing the insertion of *ne* after a lexical NP may be the wish to demarcate full NPs from what precedes them; as in the following example, also taken from Armstrong (2002: 162):

(5) les profs n'ont pas la loi

Here the tendency towards *enchaînement* or forward linking of word-final consonants would have produced the following phonetic sequence in the absence of *ne* (a full stop indicates a syllable boundary): le. pʁɔ. fɔ̃. pa. la. lwa. The likelihood of ambiguity is small here, but the non-coincidence of syllable boundary and word boundary, although common in French generally, is brought about in this instance following non-insertion of *ne*.

The consequence for the use of *ne* of the very frequent retention of the clitic subject pronoun before the verb, and the allied tendency to group together elements of morphemic information, is perhaps that irrespective of the presence of an NP subject elsewhere in the string, speakers are in very many cases operating with the quasi-fused clitic + verb sequence, and that this is a constraint that greatly disfavors the use of *ne*. However, the constraint clearly varies according to the frequency of the clitic pronoun. Moreau's study (1986) distinguished between the frequency of *ne* retention in phrases that can be thought of as being constructed on an item-by-item basis according to morpho-syntactic rules, and ‘pre-formed sequences’: that is, very common combinations of words that are perhaps stored in their entirety rather than

*The recent decline of French ne*

being built up incrementally from their individual structural units. Speakers are therefore perhaps operating to some extent with pre-formed sequences held in the inventory in the same way as the individual lexical items that are combined to form sentences in the Chomskyan ‘creative’ sense. Pre-formed sequences such as *c’est pas, j’aime pas*, etc., will very often contain the more frequent clitic pronouns, which as Coveney points out (1996: 73–4) are part of a closed class, unlike NPs:

We may suppose that, given the greater length and diversity of NP subjects, there is perhaps a tendency for speakers to require more time in producing them and hence for their use to slow down the rate of speech somewhat. This, in itself, may increase the speaker’s degree of self-monitoring, which in turn would lead to a tendency to use more formal variants [. . .].

We can suppose further that these remarks apply also to some of the subject pronouns, so far as their lesser frequency may require greater self-monitoring. Coveney (ibid.) reports a 67.2% rate of *ne* retention with NP subjects in his corpus, which contrasts most dramatically with 2.3% with the clitic pronoun *ce*.

The factor of frequency of occurrence appears therefore to be influencing the rate of reduction in the use of *ne* across the two corpora, as there is an approximate correlation apparent in Table 5 below, between frequency of the subject pronoun and percentage reduction of *ne* over the two corpora. Table 5 shows subject clitic pronouns ranked according to the number of tokens of negated verb phrases associated with them, collected in the two corpora combined and in descending order of frequency. The four most frequent subject pronouns show the four highest figures for reduction of *ne* across the two corpora.

As stated above, the correspondence between frequency of the subject

Table 5. *Reduction of ne retention between Ågren and TS according to frequency of subject pronoun*

Subject pronoun	Number of tokens	% reduction in <i>ne</i> retention Ågren > TS
il	805	23.6
je	752	30.1
ce	419	39.2
on	366	26.4
nous	159	15.5
ils	130	17.3
vous	101	15.1
elle	77	2.6
elles	15	–
tu	11	–

pronoun and percentage reduction of *ne* over the two corpora is not perfect; indeed, the disparity between the frequency of *il* and its rather modest decline relative to *ce* is rather striking. Coveney (1996: 81) noted a higher retention rate (30%) than the average (18.8%) in his Somme corpus in the sequence *ils avaient*, and suggested that such sequences ‘involve a more or less obligatory liaison if *ne* is omitted, and it may be that speakers feel that this would highlight the absence of the negative particle, which is still, of course, considered a non-standard feature’. Similarly, Armstrong (2002: 159) discusses sequences such as *i(l) (n') a pas voulu*, where some speakers in the Lorraine speaker sample referred to in Table 2 above appeared to insert [n] rather than the [l] of the pronoun. These cases were discounted in view of the difficulty of clear identification. Coveney (1996: 81) reports a 12.2% retention rate in this context, so that it is very likely that *ne* was deleted in these instances in the Lorraine corpus. The proximity of the place of articulation of /l/ and /n/, as well as acoustic similarities between the sounds, account perhaps for this identification difficulty.

Nevertheless, for other speaker samples in more highly monitored situations, the cases of *ils* and *il* may be similar in that *ne* deletion after both pronouns involves alternation between two consonants rather than presence/absence of a segment. It may be therefore that when a speaker omits *ne* in the sequence cited above, thereby producing [ilapavuly] in place of the standard [i(l)napavuly], the absence of the negative particle, or rather its substitution in a prominent syllable-initial position for an alternant that is associated with an affirmative sequence (e.g. *il a accepté de le faire*), is highlighted in a way that is more salient than in a locus where *ne* is deleted before a consonant which is present irrespective of *ne* deletion, as in *il (ne) veut pas le faire*.

### 5.2 Rates of *ne* retention with non-clitic subjects of the negated verb

Table 6 shows results for non-clitic subject NPs and proforms. There are again very highly significant results between the two corpora for the linguistic items that occurred frequently enough for statistical testing to be possible. The relative stability of *ne* after full noun phrases (a reduction of 6.1%) is in marked contrast to negated verbs containing clitic subjects (a reduction of 27.6%). The difference in the likelihood of *ne* retention between negated verbs with clitic subjects and those with non-clitic subjects has therefore increased over 40 years or so. In Ågren’s corpus the difference between the two kinds of subject, in terms of the percentage of *ne* retention, was 8.2%; in the present corpus it is 27.4%. These results therefore add weight to the argument that the clitic subject pronouns are increasingly felt by speakers to be bound to their following verbs, as discussed above.

A further noteworthy point is the remarkably high proportion of tokens with full noun phrase subjects (21.3% in Ågren’s corpus and 20.3% in the TS corpus), contrasting with a proportion of only 7.9% for noun phrase subject

The recent decline of French *ne*

Table 6. *Ne* retention according to subject (non-clitics)

Subject	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
ceci	3	0	(100)	3	0	(100)
Noun phrases	546	8	98.5	387	32	92.4
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 23.08$ , 1 d.f.)					
qui	208	7	96.7	134	17	88.7
Significance	p < 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 9.27$ , 1 d.f.)					
cela	7	0	(100)	7	1	(87.5)
ça	96	6	94.1	105	27	79.5
Significance	p < 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 10.09$ , 1 d.f.)					
lui	1	0	(100)	0	0	–
Totals	861	21	97.6	636	77	89.2
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 48.45$ , 1 d.f.)					
Adjusted	861	21	97.6	642	71	90.0
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 41.64$ , 1 d.f.)					
All tokens	2404	191	92.6	1498	568	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					

tokens in Ashby's study of Tours interview speech. In Coveney's corpus (1996: 73) the proportion is 5.9%. A cross-stylistic finding is reported by Armstrong (2002: 162) who reported, in the speech of one informant from the Lorraine sample referred to above, a figure of eight non-pronoun subjects out of 129 potential loci for insertion of *ne* (6.2%) in the relatively formal speech style elicited, interviews with a non-native speaker (Armstrong). In a less formal style (peer interaction), out of 164 potential loci, only three (1.8%) sequences were capable of an unambiguous interpretation as lexical NPs (and none triggered *ne*). This is an overall figure of 3.7%.

The frequent use of NP subjects in formal and public speech can be interpreted as reflecting a concern on the informant's part to issue the decontextualised information often required in interactions which take place largely between non-intimates who possess a restricted degree of shared knowledge relative to participants in less public types of discourse. Correspondingly, the more frequent use of clitic subjects in informal styles of speech can reflect the more intensive and less wide-ranging nature of the discussions and narratives that take place in them; for example, at one point in a conversation between peers in Armstrong's Lorraine corpus, three 20-year-old female informants engaged in a comparison of their experiences when taking driving lessons that lasted some 15 minutes. Clearly, an extended discussion of this type implies a frequent use of pronoun subjects, to the extent that the participants will tend to be aware of the identity of the referents. This

distinction recalls the Bernsteinian ‘restricted–non–restricted’ duality. In addition, the tendency of French speakers in less formal styles to insert a doubled pronoun alongside a noun phrase subject, as in *il [n'] a pas peur mon père* or *mon père il [n'] a pas peur*, is less prevalent in public styles such as radio speech, perhaps partly because the surface pleonastic structure of utterances of this kind, as mentioned previously, may attract unfavourable attention. A further striking feature is the stability of the proportion of noun phrases across the two radio corpora during this period.

### 5.3 Rates of *ne* retention with subjectless negated verbs

Table 7. Retention of *ne* in subjectless negated verbs

Category	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
Infinitives	92	1	98.9	59	4	93.6
Imperatives	44	3	93.6	19	1	95.0
Present participle	2	0	(100)	4	2	(66.7)
Totals	138	4	97.2	82	7	92.1
All tokens	2404	191	92.6	1498	568	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					

What is noticeable in Table 7 is the stability of *ne* retention in all subjectless negated verbs: an overall decline of just 5.1% has been recorded between the two corpora, which contrasts markedly with the 20.7% reduction for negated verbs with subjects. This high rate of retention accords with the findings of Coveney (1996: 73), who reported a 62.5% rate of *ne* retention in subjectless expressions where the verb was in the infinitive, as opposed to 18.8% *ne* retention in all contexts. Again, it seems likely that the relative rarity of negated verbs lacking overt subjects leads speakers to focus on the negative markers in the utterance more than they would do in expressions with subjects, and this greater self-monitoring would naturally entail a higher rate of *ne* retention.

### 5.4 Rates of *ne* retention according to the negative marker following the verb

Table 8 below suggests a correlation between the frequency of the negative adverb and the likelihood of *ne* deletion, although as before the correspondence is not precise. The four most common negative adverbs can be arranged in a hierarchy according to the likelihood that *ne* will be deleted: *pas* (3,840 tokens in the two corpora), *plus* (196), *rien* (136), *jamais* (146). It appears again

The recent decline of French *ne*

Table 8. Retention of *ne* according to associated negative item

Negative item	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
nul	3	0	(100)	4	0	(100)
que	134	4	97.1	57	3	95.0
jamais	86	3	96.6	50	7	87.7
Significance	p < 0.05 ( $\chi^2 = 4.32$ , 1 d.f.)					
aucun(e)	44	5	89.8	41	9	82.0
rien	75	4	94.9	46	11	80.7
Significance	p < 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 6.84$ , 1 d.f.)					
plus	103	8	92.8	66	19	77.6
Significance	p < 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 9.30$ , 1 d.f.)					
pas	1925	167	92.0	1232	516	70.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 302.05$ , 1 d.f.)					
ni	9	0	(100)	1	1	(50.0)
personne	7	0	(100)	1	2	(33.3)
guère	14	0	(100)	0	0	–
point	4	0	(100)	0	0	–
Totals	2404	191	92.6	1498	568	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					
Adjusted	2404	191	92.6	1510	556	73.1
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 326.71$ , 1 d.f.)					

that the most frequent collocations discourage the retention of intervening elements, where these can be omitted without compromising the meaning.

An exception to this tendency is restrictive *que*, which is frequent in the two corpora (198 tokens) yet shows very little recession (2.1%). Ashby (1976: 123) suggests that deletion of *ne* can result in the confusion of *que* as restrictive marker with its function as a complementiser, as in:

(6) je ne crois que Jean ~ je crois que Jean a raison

Speakers may therefore tend to maintain *ne* as a means of avoiding ambiguity. However, this argument seems more plausible when applied to the negative function of *plus*, which does show considerable recession (15.2%). For instance, if *ne* is omitted in *je n'en ai plus* it may be interpreted as meaning 'I have more of them', even though *plus* in the affirmative sequence *j'en ai plus* will tend strongly to have final [s]. Indeed, one can argue that pronunciation of positive *plus* as [plys] is the element that makes possible the deletion of *ne* in phrases of this type. We are obliged to admit that in the overwhelming majority of situations, communicative difficulties consequent on the deletion of *ne* associated with *que* are unlikely to occur, and the stability of *ne . . . que*

remains puzzling, especially as the restrictive marker is capable of bearing secondary stress in sequences of the *je (ne) crois que Jean* type.

As regards the low rate of *ne* retention with *pas*, again this seems to be connected with its high frequency in speech and hence its frequent location in pre-formed sequences. Indeed, 84.6% of the tokens recorded in the present corpus contained *pas*, making it by far the most common negative marker.

No tokens of *guère* and *point* were present in the TS corpus, and the small number of tokens recorded for *nul* and *ni* in both corpora rule out the possibility of a valid analysis.

5.5 Rates of *ne* retention associated with an object proclitic

Table 9. Retention of *ne* with negated verbs associated with an object proclitic

Proclitic	Ågren			TS		
	+ ne	– ne	% + ne	+ ne	– ne	% + ne
le/l'/la	67	8	89.3	25	3	89.3
lui/leur	8	0	(100)	3	0	(100)
en	40	2	95.2	19	2	90.5
te/t'	2	0	(100)	0	0	–
nous	22	1	95.6	3	1	(75.0)
les	9	1	(90.0)	8	1	(88.9)
y	163	19	89.0	108	49	68.8
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 22.53$ , 1 d.f.)					
me/m'	29	1	96.7	8	2	80.0
se/s'	96	5	95.0	43	21	67.2
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 23.08$ , 1 d.f.)					
vous	16	3	(84.2)	6	2	(75.0)
Totals	452	40	91.9	223	81	73.3
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 49.97$ , 1 d.f.)					
No proclitics	1952	151	92.8	1276	486	72.4
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 289.91$ , 1 d.f.)					
All tokens	2404	191	92.6	1499	567	72.5
Significance	p < 0.001 ( $\chi^2 = 341.98$ , 1 d.f.)					

Table 9 shows rates of *ne* retention in the two corpora for negated verbs containing an object proclitic. For many of the object proclitics, insufficient tokens occurred in the speech samples to permit any firm conclusions to be drawn, notably for *lui/leur*, *te*, *nous*, *les*, *me*, and *vous*. Nevertheless, both corpora display very little difference in rates of *ne* retention between negated verbs with and without non-subject proclitics (1.1% in Ågren's corpus, 0.9% in the present corpus). Furthermore, the overall decline in *ne* retention

### *The recent decline of French ne*

between the two types of negative expression just mentioned is very similar (18.4% with non-subject proclitics, 20.4% with none). Hence it seems that the absence or presence of a non-subject proclitic is not a significant factor in *ne* retention, a similar finding to that of Ashby (1981: 679), who reported only a marginally lower rate of *ne* deletion in negated verbs with object clitics (36%) than in those without (37%).

### 6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results presented above suggest strongly that *ne* deletion is spreading to highly monitored speech styles such as those found in serious radio discussions. As might be expected, the decline in levels of *ne* retention is occurring at a greater rate in linguistic contexts where deletion is favoured by the tendency to fuse clitic pronoun and verb form; while unfavourable contexts, most notably the full noun phrase, show considerable stability.

On the assumption that Ashby's findings in Tours speech (1981, 2001) are indicative of French as a whole, then it seems that the decline in *ne* retention observed in radio speech is paralleled by a similar change in spontaneous conversation among the public. The declines in the two kinds of speech would therefore appear to be mutually reinforcing. Specifically, public speakers such as radio journalists produce an approximation to the mix of linguistic forms they think their audience expects to hear (Bell, 1992). At the same time serious radio journalists are commonly regarded as the custodians of the standard language. It is clear from a comparison of Ashby's diachronic study and the present results that politicians and broadcast journalists are not at the forefront of linguistic change, with the rest of the speech community following; nor does it seem very plausible that many speakers want to imitate the language they hear on the serious broadcast media, or that many linguistic changes originate in these formal, highly-planned varieties. It would appear therefore that serious broadcast journalists are at once the guardians of the standard language, and participants in variation and change within it. The standard language is of course subject to change like every other variety; language in the serious spoken media is more formal than most, but still reflects, with a time lag, changes that are proceeding in more casual speech. This explains the large numbers of letters received by the BBC, and by *France Inter* and *France Culture*, complaining about the sloppy pronunciation and non-standard accents of radio and TV announcers, who are regarded by many people as the custodians of the spoken standard.

Smith (1996) has provided quantitative evidence for the reflection of social change in linguistic change in France that corroborates the results presented here. Smith 1996, 1998 traced the decline in the two corpora discussed here of the use of variable liaison, finding a decline in variable liaison in five out of the six grammatical categories he studied, and an overall decline from 61.6% in Ågren's data to 46.8% in his own. Smith argues that from about the late 1960s

*Nigel Armstrong and Alan Smith*

onwards, the attitude of the French upper-middle class towards the standard language has undergone substantial changes, as a result of the way French society has evolved in this period. Smith suggests that the decline in variable liaison reflects the changes consequent principally on the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, typified most spectacularly by the May 1968 events. Although no substantive change in the French economic structure has taken place during this period, most notably in terms of the distribution of wealth and income, important *symbolic* social changes have come about. After Italy, France continues to have the highest ratio of inequality (15:1) between the highest and lowest 10% of wage-earners in the OECD group of countries; at the same time French decision-makers now feel the need to adopt a consensual rather than a directive approach, and to emphasise solidarity rather than hierarchy. Social divisions, between the middle and working classes, men and women, young and old, have become blurred during this period, even though economic divisions are as sharp as before, or even sharper, as Smith points out (1996: 133–4). Therefore it seems logical that a linguistic variable such as liaison should decline during this period, given that it is so stereotypically a prestige phenomenon. The same remarks apply broadly to the retention of *ne*.

A further influential factor that should be mentioned here in connexion with the recent and rapid decline of overtly prestigious linguistic features is the promotion of the values of youth that has taken place in the decades since the 1950s, and the connected phenomena associated with the ‘decline of deference’, illustrated perhaps most vividly by the ‘events’ of May 1968 in France. The increasing informalisation of the last 40 or so years has been propelled in substantial measure by the greatly enhanced socio-cultural influence of younger people, consequent on their increasing economic status as an immensely important consumer group beginning in the 30 or so years of post-war economic reconstruction and growth from 1945–75: ‘*les trente glorieuses*’, in the French phrase; and seemingly gathering pace since that period.

On an impressionistic level, other linguistic changes in this period corresponding to the decline of prestige forms include most obviously the increasing acceptability in everyday language, and indeed in some forms of writing, of taboo words. The informalisation referred to above has had effects in change at all of the levels of linguistic analysis, and the variationist method is beginning to provide clear evidence of this, on some levels at least.

*Authors’ address:*

*Nigel Armstrong and Alan Smith*

*French Department*

*University of Leeds*

*Leeds*

*LS2 9JT*

*n.r.armstrong@leeds.ac.uk*

*The recent decline of French ne*

REFERENCES

- Ågren, J. (1973). *Etude sur quelques liaisons facultatives dans le français de la conversation radiophonique*. Uppsala University Press.
- Armstrong, N. and S. Unsworth (1999). Sociolinguistic variation in southern French schwa. *Linguistics*, 37.1: 127–56.
- Armstrong, N. (2002). Variable deletion of French *ne*: a cross-stylistic perspective. *Language Sciences*, 24.1: 153–73.
- Ashby, W. (1976). The loss of the negative morpheme *ne* in Parisian French. *Lingua*, 39: 119–37.
- Ashby, W. (1981). The loss of the negative particle *ne* in French: a syntactic change in progress. *Language*, 57: 674–87.
- Ashby, W. (2001). Un Nouveau regard sur la chute du *ne* en français parlé tourangeau: s'agit-il d'un changement en cours? *Journal of French Language Studies*, 11.1: 1–22.
- Ayres-Bennett, W. (1994). Negative evidence: or another look at the non-use of negative *ne* in seventeenth-century French. *French Studies*, 48.1: 63–85.
- Bell, A. (1982). This isn't the BBC: colonialism in New Zealand English. *Applied Linguistics*, 3: 246–58.
- Coveney, A. B. (1996). *Variability in Spoken French. A Sociolinguistic Study of Interrogation and Negation*. Exeter: Elm Bank.
- Diller, A.-M. (1983). Subject NP structure and variable constraints; the case of *ne*-deletion. In: R. Fasold (ed.), *Variation in the Form and Use of Language*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, pp. 167–75.
- Gadet, F. (2000). Des Corpus pour (*ne*) . . . pas. In: M. Bilger (ed.), *Corpus, méthodologie et applications linguistiques*. Paris: Champion, pp. 156–67.
- Harris, M. (1988). French. In: M. Harris and N. Vincent (eds.), *The Romance Languages*. London: Croom Helm, pp. 209–45.
- Milroy, J., Milroy, L., Hartley, S., Walshaw, D. (1994). Glottal stops and Tyneside glottalisation: competing patterns of variation and change in British English. *Language Variation and Change*, 6: 327–57.
- Moreau, M.-L. (1986). Les Séquences préformées: entre les combinaisons libres et les idiomatismes. Le cas de la négation avec et sans *ne*. *Le Français moderne*, 54: 137–60.
- Pohl, J. (1968). *Ne* dans le français parlé contemporain: les modalités de son abandon. *Actes du Xe congrès international de linguistique et de philologie romanes*, Vol. 2: 1343–59.
- Pohl, J. (1975). L'omission de *NE* dans le français parlé contemporain. *Le Français dans le monde*, 111: 17–23.
- Pooley, T. (1996). *Chtimi: the Urban Vernaculars of Northern France*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Rowntree, D. (1981). *Statistics without Tears*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Sankoff, G. and D. Vincent (1980). The productive use in *ne* in spoken Montreal French. In: G. Sankoff (ed.), *The Social Life of Language*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 295–310.
- Smith, A. (1996). A Diachronic Study of French Variable Liaison. MLitt dissertation: University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Smith, A. (1998). French variable liaison: a proposed simplification. *Francophonie*, 17: 11–14.
- Vendryes, J. (1921). *Le Langage: introduction linguistique à l'histoire*. Paris: Renaissance du livre.