
The Negative Cycle from point to du tout in Conversational Discourse from the Margins

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Résumé

Based on ongoing work on negation in conversational discourse, this contribution explores the diachronic arc of French negation from *ne* ‘old *not*’ > ‘negative emphatic,’ *point* ‘an iota, not at all,’ *pas* ‘not,’ to *du tout* ‘(not) at all,’ as older and younger speakers co-construct and navigate their negative commentary in their shared conversational experiences. Data come from a corpus of face-to-face conversational European French.

Results show that:

ne:

- Historically the sole negative marker in French, *ne* never occurs alone in the corpus, although this remains a possibility in writing (Muller, 1994: 7).

- Residual ‘bi-partite’ negation (*ne...pas*), (1.a-b), is rarely produced in this corpus by younger *or* older speakers, and younger speakers use it in a restricted range of constructions, (1b).

- Through repragmatization, *ne* is taking on a new function as an emphatic, (1c).

- *point*:

An older emphatic accompanying *ne* and once in competition with *pas*, *point* is widely believed to have disappeared from contemporary usage. However, a married couple of older, conservative speakers co-produce a pair of *point*, (2), both co-occurring with *ne*. Conversely, no younger speakers produce *point*.

- *pas*:

Originally an emphatic to reinforce *ne*, *pas* has become the sole negative marker in over 95% of negative utterances here, used by younger and older speakers alike, (3). *du tout*:

- Added to *pas* by younger and older speakers to emphasize negative meaning, (4.a-c).

- As such, acquiring negative meaning of its own among younger speakers, (4d-e). Conversely, the pair of older *point* speakers never produce *du tout*.

These findings inform our understanding of negation in conversation and its intersections with language change on the margins.

References:

Muller, Claude. 1994. La négation comme jugement : Une application aux interronégatives. *Linx (enligne): Revue des linguistes de l’université Paris X Nanterre*: 7-14.

Mots-Clés: français des corpus, conversation, négation, diachronie, français hors de France

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