The role of phonology in language change: evidence from clitics and infinitives in French

Background: The literature available on the diachrony of clitic placement in French leaves a series of open questions, since infinitival contexts have not been investigated in a quantitative manner (de Kok, 1985; Hirschbühler and Labelle, 2000, 2003, 2006; Labelle and Hirschbühler, 2005; Simonenko and Hirschbühler, 2012). In this paper, we expose the full evolution of clitic placement with infinitives in French from the mid-12th to the mid-19th century. Proclisis is systematically found in Modern French (1) whereas other canonical languages have (optional) clitic climbing (CC) in restructuring contexts (2) and enclisis elsewhere (3).

(1) Je veux   **le** <u>voir</u>.   [Modern French]
   I want.1SG him=see.INF
   'I want to see him.'

(2) **Lo** voglio   <u>vedere</u>.   [Italian]   (3) Penso   di <u>veder**lo**</u>.   [Italian]
   him=want.1SG see.INF   think.1SG to see.INF=him
   'I want to see him.'   'I think I see him

Our data show that Old French patterned more closely to Italian, and we claim that two phonological changes shaped clitic placement in French.

Methodology: To expose the diachrony of clitic placement with infinitives, we have created a corpus of 19 legal texts covering 700 years (1150-1856). This register was chosen over literature as it is closer to what the vernacular was (Balon and Larrivée, 2016; Olivier, 2021).

Findings: We found a total of 3,541 cases of cliticization, and three main orderings have been identified: enclisis, proclisis and CC.
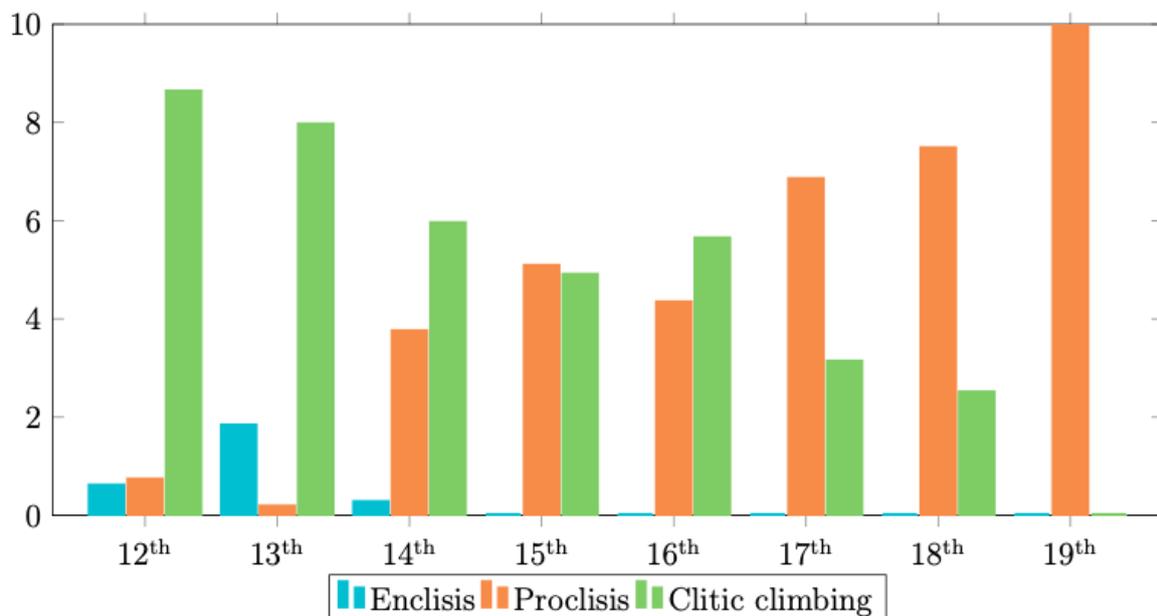
In restructuring clauses, CC is found in almost all sentences until the early 16th century (4)[1]. In non-restructuring clauses until then, we mostly find enclisis in Old French (5)[2] (although rare instances of proclisis are noted), and we find proclisis in Middle French, that is after 1300.

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[1] *Établissements et coutumes, assises et arrêts de l'échiquier de Normandie au treizième siècle*, p.83 (13th c.).
[2] *Grand Coutumier de Normandie*, Seq 283 (ca. 1300).

(4) Bertrans ne **le** volt <u>randre</u>.   (5) tu   mobliges   a <u>fere</u> **le**.
     Bertran not it=want.3SG render.INF   you me=force.2SG to do.INF=it
     'Bertran doesn't want to give it back.'   'You force me to do it.'

Thus, the first change we observe is the shift from enclisis to proclisis in non-restructuring clauses at the dawn of the 14th century. The second change we observe is the shift from (systematic) CC to proclisis in restructuring clauses, which took place between the 17th century and the end of the 18th century. From the early 19th century on, proclisis is the only attested ordering.

Discussion: We map the reorganization of clitic placement with infinitives onto a series of phonological changes. We will address non-restructuring clauses first.

Kayne (1991) proposes that clitics target a constant functional projection, and he claims that patterns of enclisis and proclisis depend on how high the infinitive moves. According to this hypothesis, Italian infinitives move higher than their Modern French counterparts. This is confirmed by the placement of adverbs (Schifano, 2018). Furthermore, the -*r* suffix of French infinitives was dropped on -*er*, -*ir* and -*oir* infinitives in Old French (Vising, 1899), at the time we observe a shift from enclisis to proclisis. We adopt Roberts' (2010) view that clitics are systematically realized on *v*, and we claim that -*r* served as a *trigger* (Roberts, 2019) in Old French for V-to-T movement. This is similar to Kayne's (1991) proposal for enclisis in Italian. Under this view, the loss of -*r* in the phonology resulted in the loss of a trigger for the acquirers, hence the loss of V-to-T movement with infinitives, and the rise of proclisis. The syntax of adverbs in Old French provides supporting evidence that infinitives could move higher.

In restructuring clauses, we argue that as long as CC was systematic, cliticization always yielded on the higher *v*. Between the 15th and the 17th century, the lower *v* became an additional cliticization site in Romance and CC became optional (Bekowies and McLaughlin, 2020). To account for the loss of optionality of CC in French, we adopt Ledgeway and Lombardi's (2005) view that cliticization is either syntactic or phonological. The former takes place before Spell-Out, whereas the latter is a PF phenomenon. In Old French and Middle French, we take cliticization on infinitives to be phonological: the clitic is realized on the appropriate *v*-head (the higher one before the 16th century, either the higher or the lower one after), and cliticization on the verb takes place at PF. Independent evidence comes from instances of interpolation until the early 19th century, whereby an element intervenes between the clitic and the infinitive [*clitic XP V*INF]. Where interpolation is found, the clitic cliticizes on the following element at PF. Interpolation and CC disappear around 1800: we claim that this change stems from a shift from phonological to syntactic cliticization. From ca. 1800 on, cliticization is necessarily within the domain of the infinitive (i.e. CC is not available), and adjacent to it (i.e. interpolation is not available either). In other words, we propose that by this stage, cliticization on V takes place before Spell-Out.

Conclusion: We propose that (i) the loss of enclisis in French stems from the erosion of the morphophonology of infinitives (hence the loss of V-movement), and (ii) the loss of CC stems from the reanalysis of cliticization from PF phenomenon to syntactic phenomenon. Ultimately, this analysis accounts for the difference between Modern French and other canonical Romance languages like Italian, in which none of these changes took place.

Selected references: Kayne, R. (1991), 'Romance clitics, verb movement and PRO', *Linguistic Inquiry* 22. • Labelle, M. and Hirschbühler, P. (2005), Changes in Clausal Organization and the Position of Clitics in Old French, 'Grammaticalization and Parametric Variation', Oxford University Press, 60-71. • Ledgeway, A. and Lombardi, A. (2005), 'Verb movement, adverbs and clitic positions in romance', *Probus* 17. • Roberts, I (2019), Parameter Hierarchies & Universal Grammar, Oxford University Press.