

Topic drop in French text messages

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In this contribution I will argue that referential subject omission in French text messages has to be analysed as topic drop. The empirical study is based on a corpus of 4628 text messages from Switzerland (cf. www.sms4science.ch).

Standard French is not a *pro*-drop, neither a topic drop language. Nevertheless, in French text messages we find a lot of examples like in (1), which show subject drop.

- (1) [...] Hier __ suis allée chez le docteur qui m a attribué une bronchite infectieuse! [...]
'[...] Yesterday __ have been to the doctor's who me has attributed an infectious
bronchitis. [...]

The phenomenon of dropping subjects in non-normative written contexts has been studied by Haegeman (e.g. 2013) for English and French diaries. There, the distribution of dropped subjects is not free, but it is restricted to root environments in the strict sense (i.e. it is limited to main clauses without fronted arguments and/or *wh*- elements, but it can occur after adjuncts). Further, also expletive subjects, which cannot be topics, are easily dropped.

Given these syntactic regularities and the fact that, “[t]here is no systematic object drop in the diary register”, Haegeman (2013: 97) proposes an analysis of subject drop in diaries in terms of a truncated structure without a CP-layer.

Subject drop in the text message corpus shows by and large the same distribution as diary drop. However, there are examples of subject omission which are not compatible with a truncation analysis, like example (2), where the subject clitic is dropped in the presence of a fronted contrastive topic *moi*.

- (2) [...] Bref ben moi mtn __ me suis organisé différemment [...]
'[...] In short, well, me now __ have organized myself differently [...]

In contrast to the studied diaries, object drop does not seem to be impossible in text messages either, and it is not restricted to individual level predicates like *apprécier*, *adorer*, *détester*, *hair*, etc. (cf. Abeillé et al. 2008 for a similar discussion). This is shown in example (3), where the direct object of the verb *donner* is dropped.

- (3) Hello!non papa m'a déjà donné __, donc pas dproblème!ptetre à toute!:)
'Hello! no, dad me has already given __, so no problem! maybe see you later!:]

Based on these observations, I will propose an analysis in terms of topic drop for omitted referential arguments in French text messages (expletive drop being a different but related phenomenon).

I claim that the dropped arguments are familiar topics (cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007), which are moved to the left periphery and leave an empty category in their base position. These moved topics are syntactically present but, in the case of personal pronouns, they cannot be spelt out because of the limited inventory of pronoun classes in French.

French does only have strong and clitic pronouns, but not weak ones (like e.g. Italian *loro*). I do not consider French clitics as weak (contra e.g. Cardinaletti/Starke 1999) because they cannot be separated from their host verb (at least *je*, *tu*, and *il(s)*, cf. e.g. Cardinaletti 2004 or Rizzi/Shlonsky 2007). Strong subject pronouns on the other hand, are always interpreted as shifting topics, contrastive topics, or foci, but never as familiar topics. This is not surprising inasmuch as the latter cannot be stressed (cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007).

Thus, in a familiar topic position, pronouns are separated from their host verb, which excludes their spell out as clitics, and, at the same time, the interpretation of strong pronouns as shifting or contrastive entities rules them out as familiar topics. These two restrictions lead to the

conclusion that in French, being a language without weak pronouns, the pronominal features of the familiar topic can only be spelt out as zero.

Example (1) must then be analysed as in (4) (the adverb being adjoined to TP).

(4) [_{FamTop} Ø_i ... [TP [_{AdvP} Hier] t_i suis allée chez le docteur...]]

The possibility of deriving topics by a movement operation in French (in addition to the more familiar clitic left dislocation structure) is supported by example (2). In this example, *moi* can be analysed as a moved contrastive topic. Contrastive topics are stressed; hence the pronominal features are spelt out as a strong pronoun.

The root distribution of moved topics (i.e. without clitic resumption) can then be explained by intervention effects. Qualifying as an operator, the moved topic interferes with other operators (e.g. *wh*-operators, cf. Rizzi 2013). And, if we adopt Haegeman's (2012) derivational analysis for central adverbial clauses and factive complement clauses by operator movement, moved topics will also be excluded in this type of subordinate clauses.

The proposed analysis is based upon topicalizing strategies found in other languages e.g. in English Topicalization Structure (cf. Cinque 1990). Topic drop can further be argued to be a universal discourse licensing strategy also observed for children acquiring French (cf. Schmitz/Patuto/Müller 2012), which is reactivated in a context where cognitive control is high due to the written modality: "Control implies a certain detachment from content, and the ability to select appropriate linguistic forms, morpho-syntactic constructions and lexical expressions, to weigh alternatives, and to access non-default, less productive, marked options." (Ravid/Tolchinsky 2002: 431).

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Corpus: www.sms4science.ch