Topic-drop in French text messages

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1. Introduction

In **French text messages**, we find **dropped subjects** in contexts in which it is **not licit in Standard or Colloquial spoken French**. Omission is, however, not free but follows by and large the same **patterns** as found for subject drop in diaries according to Haegeman (e.g. 2013), i.e. in **clause initial** position or **after adjuncts** (cf. (1)).

(1) […] ***Hier Ø suis*** *allée chez le docteur* […] (SMS 19357)
'[…] Yesterday Ø went to the doctor's […]'

2. Data

The corpus analysed consists of **4'627 text messages** in **French**, which were collected in **Switzerland** between **November 2009 to January 2010** (for further information cf. Dürscheid/Stark 2011 and www.sms4science.ch).
About **14'000 subjects** were annotated manually.

3. State of the Art

The only similar research on dropped subjects in **informal written language** is by Haegeman (e.g. 2013) for English and French **diaries**.
Haegeman analyses clauses with dropped subjects in diaries as **truncated structures**. She excludes an analysis as *topic*-drop because there is **no systematic drop of objects**; **expletives**, on the other hand, which cannot be interpreted as topics, are **dropped frequently**.

4. Observations

- Null subjects in French text messages can occur in **clause initial** position, and **after adjuncts** (cf. (1) above).
- Contrary to *diary*-drop style, null subjects in text messages can also appear
  - in **peripheral subordinate** clauses (cf. Haegeman 2012) (cf. (2) and (3)):

(2) […] *Moi j te cache pas **qu Ø** suis pas mott à faire grd chose! :-)* (19036)
'[…] Me I you hide not that Ø am not motivated to do great thing! :-)'
in the sense of: 'Me, I tell you that…'

(3) […] *1 truc ki est sur c'est ke Ø fo ke j'apprenne à fermé ma gueule* […] (19459)
'[…] 1 thing that is sure is that Ø is necessary that I learn to close my mouth […]'

  - after **preposed coreferential strong subject pronouns** (cf. (4)):

(4) […] *Bref ben **moi** mtn **Ø** me suis organisé différement* […] (13167)
'[…] In.short well me now myself have organized differently […]'

- In addition, argument omission is **not restricted to subjects** (cf. (5) with object drop):

(5) *Hello!non papa m'a déjà donné **Ø,** donc pas dproblème!* […] (20091)
'Hello! no dad me has already given Ø, hence no problem! […]'

☞ An analysis as a truncated structure like for *diary*-drop (cf. Haegeman e.g. 2013) is excluded.
☞ Null subjects display the distribution of **Main Clause Phenomena (MCP)** (cf. e.g. Haegeman 2012).

5. Analysis

Subject drop as moved *Familiar* Topic, spelt out as zero

- Topics can be merged into the left periphery (clitic left dislocation CLLD), in which case they are doubled by a resumptive clitic (6a), or they can be derived through **movement** (topicalisation construction TC) **without resumptive clitic** (6b) (cf. Stempel 1981, Cinque 1997 [1983], Abeillé et al. 2008).

(6) a. CLLD: *L'Aquitaine$_i$, je **l$_i$'aime***.
'Aquitaine$_i$, I **it$_i$** like.'
b. TC: *L'Aquitaine, j'aime*.
'Aquitaine, I like.' (Stempel 1981: 365)

- Pronominal arguments are **feature bundles** the morphological form of which is **determined** at the **PF** interface (cf. Sigurðsson/Maling 2008).

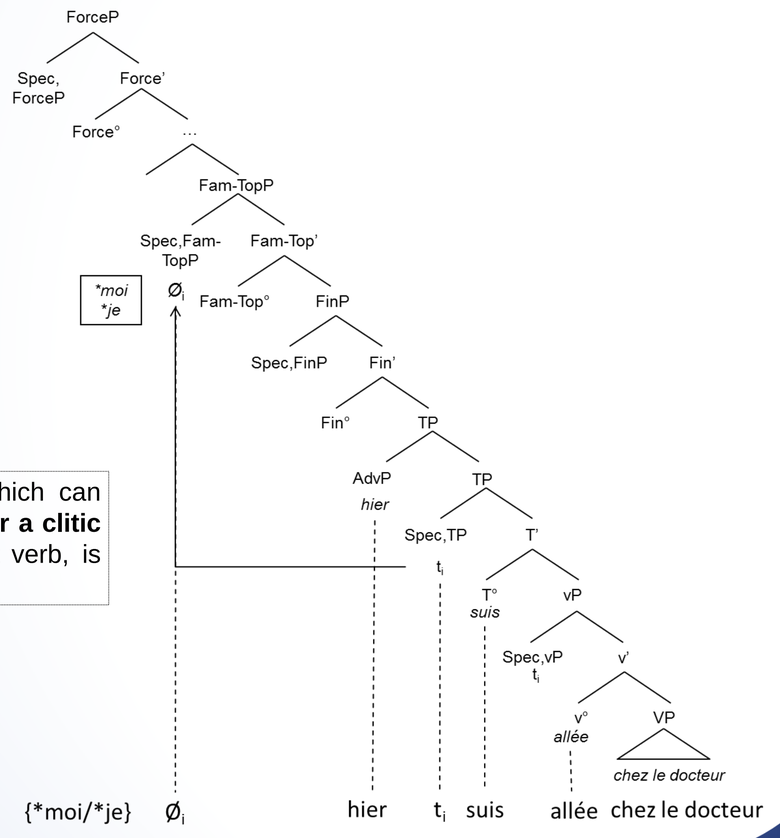
- French strong pronouns are interpreted as *Aboutness-Shift* Topics, *Contrastive* Topics or Foci (on the different types of topics cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007). French only has ***clitic* weak pronouns** (at least for 1st and 2nd pers. sg.), which **cannot be separated from their host verb** (cf. e.g. Cardinaletti 2004, Rizzi/Shlonsky 2007) (cf. the impossibility of (1')).

(1') […] **je hier suis allée chez le docteur* […]

☞ Null subjects are in fact **moved *Familiar* topics** which can **neither be stressed**, **nor clitics** separated from the host verb, and are hence **spelt out as null at PF**.

(1'') […] [$_{FamTopP}$ **Ø$_i$** … [$_{TP}$ [$_{AdvP}$ *hier*] **t$_i$** *suis allée chez le docteur* […]]]
'[…] [$_{FamTopP}$ **Ø$_i$** … [$_{TP}$ [$_{AdvP}$ yesterday] **t$_i$** went to the doctor's […]]]'

(1''')



The **Familiar Topic**, which can **neither be stressed nor a clitic** separated from its host verb, is **spelt out as zero**.

6. Some consequences

- Example (4) above has to be analysed as a **moved *Aboutness Shift* Topic**:
(4') […] [$_{AS\text{-}TopP}$ ***moi$_i$*** … [$_{TP}$ [$_{AdvP}$ *mtn*] **t$_i$** *me suis organisé différement* […]]]

- The **distribution** of null subjects, endowed with the features [OP] and [δ], can be explained by **intervention effects**, in line with other **MCP** (cf. Haegeman 2012). (7') without subject is not grammatical because the moved *qu-* constituent intervenes with the moved (zero) familiar topic, both endowed with the feature [OP] (cf. (7'b).

(7) […] *Ou est-ce que tu as acheté le calendrier de putrana?* […] (9316)
'[…] Where INTERR you have bought the calendar of putrana? […]'

(7') a. **Où est-ce que Ø* as acheté le calendrier de putrana?
b. *[$_{FocP}$ *où est-ce que$_k$* [$_{FamTopP}$ Ø$_i$ … [$_{TP}$ t$_i$ *as acheté le calendrier de p.* t$_k$]]]
*[OP] [OP,δ] *

- Expletive drop is a related, but different phenomenon: expletive *il* is dropped when the impersonal verb is focalized (cf. Zimmermann 2014); in this case, expletive *il*, may introduced at PF only, is left out, respectively cannot be spelt out in subject position (cf. Robert-Tissot 2015).

7. Conclusions

- Subject drop in French text messages is a **PF phenomenon**.
- The syntactic distribution of dropped subjects follows the **syntactic principles**, which, as a general rule, can be found for **movment to the left periphery** (i.e. for **MCP**).
- The syntax of text messages is based on (universally) available principles, i.e. there is **no register or variety-specific syntax**.

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