SWISS COLLOQUIAL FRENCH AND THE OVERT PRONOUN CONSTRAINT

Bonnie Fonseca-Greber
University of Arizona

This paper applies Montalbetti's Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC) to Swiss Colloquial French (SCF) in order to assess the status of the subject pronoun in this variety. It is shown that, if the subject clitics are assumed to be verbal prefixes of person/number, rather than pronouns, as has been demonstrated for other varieties of French, SCF behaves like Spanish with respect to the OPC. That is, in sentences containing a formal variable, an overt pronominal subject (él in Spanish and lui—not the prefix il-—in French) cannot be linked to the variable but must be interpreted as free. This semantic test offers empirical proof that SCF is a pro-drop variety. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS

Clitics and Affixes

While French has traditionally been assumed to be a classic example of a non-pro-drop language, of late there has been a number of studies showing that certain regional and/or spoken varieties may in fact be null subject languages, in contrast with the written standard. Within the generative framework, Roberge (1986, 1990) was the first to show this, claiming that there were two types of pro-drop languages: those without subject clitics like Spanish and Italian, where the null subject is identified via traditional rich agreement, and those with subject clitics like (Quebec) Colloquial French, Pied Noir French and the Northern Italian dialects, where the null subject is identified via the subject clitic. Auger (1993, 1994) takes the analysis a step further and argues that, at least for Quebec Colloquial French, the subject clitics are, in fact, affixes—inflectional prefixes, a type of agreement marker—according to Zwicky and Pullum's (1983) criteria for distinguishing between clitics and affixes. Ossipov (1990) also assumes the clitics to be verbal affixes in her SPSG analysis of subject doubling as distinct from right or left dislocation in the speech of Montreal working class adolescents. Similar conclusions have been reached for other varieties of French, regardless of the theoretical framework of the researcher. Smith (1994) applies Schwegler's (1990) analytic/synthetic morphologization continuum to Cajun French and shows it to be much more morphologically synthetic than French is traditionally assumed to be. She also reports similar findings for Old Mines French. Her analysis rests in part, once again, on the bound nature of the 'clitics.' Nadasdi (1995) also offers empirical evidence from language attrition for their affixal status in *franco-ontarien*. Language-attrited individuals generally use fewer bound morphemes, and indeed, language-attrited Franco-Ontarians used fewer subject 'clitics' than their more fluent

counterparts. Based on an earlier study of working class and middle class speakers in France, Ashby (1977) predicts that Future French will become fully synthetic. But in light of the studies of New World French just mentioned, it might appear that this phenomenon may have its origins longer ago, before French reached the New World, and may be further advanced than Ashby initially concluded. In fact, studies from first language (L1) acquisition attest to the affixal nature of the presumed clitics. Clark (1985), Pierce (1992), and Jakubowicz and Rigaut (1997) show that supposed clitic pronouns are acquired like verbal inflections.

In light of this evidence, here I assume the affixal analysis for Swiss Colloquial French (SCF) as well, by which it too becomes a null subject variety, through the optional presence of 'strong' pronouns *moi*, *toi*, *lui/elle*, etc. (arguably the only true pronouns) or various other NPs. By invoking Montalbetti's (1984) Overt Pronoun Constraint, it can be seen that this reclassification is not just terminological sleight of hand but that it does buy new theoretical ground.

The Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC)

Montalbetti formulated the Overt Pronoun Constraint, (1), in order to account for a difference in semantic interpretation that he noticed in certain Spanish sentences depending on whether the sentence contains an overt or a null pronoun.

(1) Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC):

Overt pronouns cannot link to formal variables iff the alternation overt/empty obtains. (Montalbetti, 1984, p. 94)

In other words, in sentences containing a formal variable (that is, the trace, *t*, left by a quantifier or a *wh*-word after movement), an overt pronominal subject cannot link back to that variable but instead must be interpreted as free (2a) whereas null subjects (2b) in such sentences are ambiguous, allowing both bound and free readings, as the Spanish sentences in (2) show.

(2) OPC Effects in Spanish

   (a) Nadie cree que **él** es inteligente.
        'Nobody believes that he is intelligent.'
   (b) Nadie cree que ***pro*** es inteligente.
        'Nobody believes that (he) is intelligent.'

The LF (Logical Form) representation of (2a), given in (3), shows this contrast more clearly (Montalbetti, 1984, p. 97).

(3) [Nadie] [t] cree que [él] es inteligente
        ?_??____*____?

'Nobody believes that he is intelligent.'

Two caveats are in order, however. First, it is important to note that the OPC applies only to sentences containing quantifiers (*nadie*, 'no one') or *wh*-words (*Quién* 'who') and not to those containing referential subjects such as *Juan* or *el pulpo*, 'the octopus.' As we see in (4) (Montalbetti, 1984, p. 85), the effect vanishes when we replace the quantifier *nadie* with the referential subject *Juan*.

(4)   Limitations on the OPC Effect: Referential Subjects
   (a)   [Juan] cree que [él] es inteligente
             ?_____?
          'John believes that he is intelligent.'
   (b)   [Juan] cree que [*pro*] es inteligente
             ?_____?
          'John believes that (he) is intelligent.'

Here *él*, 'he' and *Juan* can corefer, although (4b) with *pro* would probably be the preferred version for expressing coreference. Both (4a) and (4b) can be bound or free.

Second, even in sentences containing a quantifier, the OPC applies only in cases where there is the possibility of an alternation between overt or null pronouns. For example, the object of a preposition must be overt in Spanish: here *pro* would lead to ungrammaticality, as we see in (5).

(5)   Limitations on the OPC Effect: Null Objects of Prepositions
   (a)   Muchos estudiantes quieren que María se case **con ellos**.
          Many students want that Maria <u>RFLX</u>-marry **with them**
          'Many students want Mary to marry **them**.'
          (Jaeggli, 1983, in Montalbetti, 1984, p. 87)
   (b)   * Muchos estudiantes quieren que María se case **con *pro***
          Many students want that Maria <u>RFLX</u>-marry **with *pro***
          'Many students want Mary to marry *pro*.'

Hence the alternation overt/null does not obtain, and in (6), we see that the overt pronoun can in fact link to the quantifier expression.

(6)   [Muchos estudiantes] quieren que María se case con [ellos]
                          ?_____?
          Many students want that Mary <u>RFLX</u>-marry with them
          'Many students want Mary to marry them.'

To sum up, the OPC applies only to sentences containing both a formal variable and the possibility for an alternation between an overt or a null pronoun.

Although Montalbetti initially formulated the OPC for Spanish, he found that it held true for other Romance null subject languages (Italian, Portuguese, and Catalan) as well, although with minor modifications for Brazilian Portuguese and Catalan. This influenced the conception of the Null Subject Parameter since it showed that whether language had optional subjects was not simply a matter of surface form but carried semantic consequences at LF as well.

ANALYSIS

The OPC can help elucidate the status of Swiss Colloquial French (SCF) by allowing us to test directly the competing claims as to the nominal or inflectional status of the subject clitics or affixes by looking at semantic interpretation and not just surface form. Thus, one can base conclusions on empirical, semantic judgments rather than on arbitrary, theory-internal choices that are calculated to support one's favorite linguistic theory. In the present paper then, following the standard methodology of generative linguistics, the data come from linguistic intuitions supplied by a native speaker of Swiss French (a 34-year old male from La Tour-de-Peilz, Vaud) regarding the semantic interpretation of sentences with and without an overt subject pronoun (*moi*, *toi*, *lui*, *elle*, *nous*, *vous*, *eux*, *elles*).

The OPC allows one to make predictions about SCF by offering an outside diagnostic against which to evaluate competing theories. On the one hand, if SCF does not show OPC effects, then one can conclude that it is not a null subject language; on the other hand, if SCF does show OPC effects, then one can conclude that it is a null subject variety. As we have seen, OPC effects arise only in null subject languages, as revealed by the ambiguous English translation in (2), as seen above. Since English is undisputedly a non-pro-drop language, the presence of the subject is a syntactic necessity and does not affect the semantic interpretation of bound versus free pronouns in sentences containing formal variables. The absence of the pronoun results in ungrammaticality, (7).

(7) *Nobody believes that *pro* is intelligent.

By extension, if in SCF *je*, *tu*, *il/elle*, etc., are nominal elements of some sort, subject pronouns or at most phonological clitics, as has traditionally been argued for (and taught) in French, then their presence should yield a sentence that is ambiguous between bound and free readings, just as was the case with its English counterpart in (2). In fact, (8a) shows this very ambiguity, where *il*, the apparent subject pronoun, can be either bound or free. Corresponding to the English example in (7), the absence of *il* in (8b) yields ungrammaticality,

and the result has been used to substantiate the claim that *il* is a nominal element, and hence that French is a non-pro-drop language.

(8)
       (a) Personne pense qu'**il** est intelligent.
           'Nobody thinks that he is intelligent.'
       (b) *Personne pense qu'***pro*** est intelligent.
           'Nobody thinks that (he) is intelligent.'

A nominal interpretation, though, cannot neatly account for subject doubling in (9a) and even less so the topicalization plus subject doubling (9b) if both *il* and *lui* are dual nominal elements.

(9)
       (a) Personne (il-)pense que **lui il** est intelligent.
           '*Nobody thinks that **he he** is intelligent'
       (b) Personne (il-)pense que **Jean lui il** est intelligent
           '*Nobody thinks that **John he he** is intelligent'

Nor can it explain the intuition that (9) does not seem to be the same type of sentence as (8) or the fact that (9) seems closer to the more literary (10) than it does to (8).

(10)   Personne ne pense que lui **est** intelligent.
          Nobody thinks that he **<u>BE</u>** intelligent
          '*Nobody thinks that he **(is)** intelligent.'

If, however, *je*, *tu*, *il/elle*, etc. are the inflectional elements and *moi*, *toi*, *lui/elle*, etc. are the only nominal elements, the only true pronouns in SCF, then this opens the door for SCF to be a null subject variety as appears to be the case in an increasing number of other spoken and/or regional varieties of French. In this case, though, we would then expect the presence or absence of the strong pronoun to affect the semantic interpretation of the two quantified sentences. The absence of the 'strong' pronoun would yield an ambiguous sentence, one which would allow both bound and free readings whereas its presence would disambiguate the sentence allowing only the free reading since according to the OPC, overt pronouns cannot link to formal variables.
      Native speaker intuitions on the semantic interpretation of these two possibilities bear out this prediction:

(11)
       (a) Personne (il-)pense qu'*pro* il-est intelligent.
           'Nobody thinks that (he) is intelligent.'
       (b) Personne (il-)pense que lui il-est intelligent.
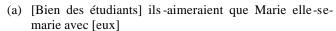   'Nobody thinks that he is intelligent.'

The LF representation of (11b) is shown in (12) where in fact *lui* cannot link to the formal variable but can only refer to an outside referent.

> (12)   [Personne] [t] (il-)pense que [lui] il-est intelligent.
>   ?_??_____*_____?
>   'Nobody thinks that he is intelligent.'

This state of affairs can obtain only if i) *il* is an inflectional affix and ii) *lui* is the overt subject pronoun. Indeed, the difference in semantic interpretation between (11a) and (11b) is the expected result if SCF is a null subject variety. The OPC simultaneously offers strong empirical evidence both of the inflectional nature of the former clitics as inflectional prefixes as well as the referential quality of the strong pronouns, and therefore the null subject status of SCF. So in the end, the proposed reclassification is not just terminological sleight of hand, but instead captures an actual typological difference between SCF and traditional reference and pedagogical descriptions of the language.

Still, additional tests remain. As we have already seen, the OPC applies within very specific conditions. The sentences must contain a formal variable and allow an alternation between the null and the overt pronoun. In sentences lacking a quantifier or *wh*-word, the effect disappears. In (13), it can be seen that this also obtains for SCF.

> (13)
>   (a)   [Jean] il-pense que [lui] il-est intelligent.
>   ?_____?
>   'John believes that he is intelligent.'
>   (b)   [Jean] il-pense qu' [*pro*] il-est intelligent.
>   ?_____?
>   'John believes that (he) is intelligent.'

When the quantifier *personne* is replaced by the referential *Jean*, the overt pronoun *lui* can link to *Jean* and the OPC effect vanishes. Second, as seen (6) above, in order to allow the legitimate linking of *ellos* to *muchos estudiantes*, the OPC had to be restrained still further so as not to apply in environments where an overt/null alternation is not possible. In (6), if the object of the preposition *ellos* is replaced by *pro* the sentence becomes ungrammatical. However, here we see a difference between Spanish and SCF. In (14a), although the *eux* (they/them) can link to the quantifier expression *bien des étudiants* (many students), this construction cannot be defined out of the OPC on the basis that the overt/null alternation is impossible because (14b) is also allowable.

(14)

    (a) [Bien des étudiants] ils -aimeraient que Marie elle -se-marie avec [eux]

?_____
_____?

         Many students <u>3PL</u>-want that Marie <u>3SG.F-RFLX</u>-marry with them

         'Many students would like Marie to marry them'

    (b) [Bien des étudiants] ils -aimeraient que Marie elle -se-marie avec [*pro*]

?_____
_____ ?

         Many students <u>3PL</u>-want that Marie <u>3SG.F-RFLX</u>-marry with *pro*

         'Many students would like Marie to marry them'

Although this contrast poses a problem for the theoretical formulation of the OPC with regard to SCF, it in no way invalidates the basic insight of the OPC; that is: in null subject languages, an overt pronoun cannot link to a formal variable because overt and null pronouns yield distinct semantic interpretations, as we observed for SCF in (11-12).

DISCUSSION

      As we have just seen, the Overt Pronoun Constraint serves as a useful diagnostic for evaluating competing claims as to the nominal versus the inflectional status of subject clitics/prefixes in Swiss Colloquial French, and by extension, the nature of the 'strong' pronouns. Under the inflectional interpretation, we see that the semantic shift predicted by the OPC does occur, lending empirical support to the inflectional prefix hypothesis. In addition, it also offers an explanation to the puzzle of why there appear to be two sets of subject pronouns in French: the weak (or clitic) pronouns and the strong (or independent) pronouns. Ultimately, as we have seen, the strong ones are the only true referential pronouns, the weak ones, or clitics, being, instead, prefixed verbal inflections.

      Unfortunately, things are never as clear-cut as they seem, and while the OPC does buy us new theoretical ground in our understanding of the inflectional prefixes of SCF, at least two puzzles remain. First, if *je-*, *tu-*, *il-/elle-*, etc., are true verbal inflections on a par with the endings of Spanish or Italian, then they should appear 100% of the time without exception on every finite verb. Yet in certain contexts, such as the quantifiers themselves, they do not appear to, as I indicated through the use of parentheses around *il-* in (11), perhaps especially within the confines of a metalinguistic exercise such as a grammaticality judgment task. First and foremost, this raises methodological questions of how to tap spontaneous, unmonitored speech in a context where we are inherently asking speakers to reflect on their language. Such a task

seems ripe for eliciting the most purist of reactions, which is no small matter when it comes to the nearly diglossic situation that exists between spoken and written French (Lodge, 1993). Mario Montalbetti (personal communication) has raised the possibility of degrees of referentially as conditioning the willingness—or unwillingness—to include *il-* with a finite verb stem following *personne* versus *tout le monde* versus *Jean*. In the end, the question of referentiality may relate to Jonathan Beck's (personal communication) notion of arrested change, where certain environments are affected last, or not at all, because of outside prescriptive pressure.

Second, within the definition of the OPC itself, the constraints on the overt/null alternation would have to be further refined to account for the *avec [pro]* constructions such as (14) in SCF, but that is beyond the scope of the present paper. For now, the essential point is that in SCF, the OPC does produce the semantic shift expected of a null subject language.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This typological reclassification of Swiss Colloquial French has far reaching consequences for how we teach French in our foreign language classroom. In closing, then, I would offer three possible suggestions for teaching French. Some of them may seem controversial but they are all directly motivated by the results of this OPC analysis. First, the inflectional prefixes should be taught as such, but in a way that is reminiscent of how *ne* is treated. In other words, instead of giving specific contexts for the *addition* of *ne*, as is done with L1 French speakers, one could give specific contexts for the *omission* of the 3rd person prefix. For instance, it could be mentioned that an inflectional prefix always precedes a verb, except in the 3rd person where it is a) sometimes omitted in speech if full NP subject is also present, and b) always omitted in writing. In addition, one should avoid translating *il-* as *he* or, for that matter, *je-* as *I*. This combined approach might keep students from producing sentences such as (15) below, produced by a fourth semester university student.

(15) mes amis et je irons au magasin ce weekend.
   'my friends and 1Sg.-will go to the store this weekend'

Second, *moi*, *toi*, *lui*, etc. should be taught as the true, personal pronouns ('I', 'you', 'he', etc.) that this OPC diagnostic shows them to be. *I* is *moi*, not *I* is *je*. Here, however, English-speaking students would have to be braced for the idea that both nominal (*Jean* (John) and *l'homme* (the man)) and pronominal subjects (*lui* (he)) are optional, since the inflectional prefixes on the verb let them know who is doing what. Additionally, students need to develop a feel for when one of these optional subject NPs is required for the pragmatic considerations of emphasis, contrast, or disambiguation. For those of them who have studied Spanish or who are Spanish-speakers themselves, they may have already heard about this linguistic possibility, and therefore it may not seem so strange. Such an approach would obviously work much

better with true beginners, who have not already been 'brainwashed' by other conceptions of the language.

Finally, and this last point is well beyond the first semester of study since subject NPs are optional and reference tracking is carried on via the person-number/gender marking on the verb, English-speaking learners of French (although presumably not Spanish-speaking ones) would need some overt instruction in how to maintain and switch referents appropriately in extended discourse. This should be done at both the receptive and productive level so as to be able to follow their interlocutor's switching throughout a narrative, and also to be able to produce coherent narratives for an L1 audience who expect null and overt subjects to be used for particular discursive purposes.

In conclusion, then, if we want our students to master both written and spoken French, we need to expose them to the intricacies of both systems in the language classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Ashby, W. (1977). *Clitic inflection in French: An historical perspective*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Auger, J. (1993). More evidence for verbal agreement marking in colloquial French. In W. Ashby, M. Mithun, et al. (Eds.), *Linguistic perspectives on the Romance languages*. (pp.177-198). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Auger, J. (1994). *Pronominal clitics in Québec Colloquial French: A morphological analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Clark, E. (1985). The acquisition of Romance, with special reference to French. In D. Slobin (Ed.), *The crosslinguistic study of language acquisition: Volume 1: The data* (pp. 687-782). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Jakubowicz, C., & Rigaut, C. (1997). L'acquisition des clitiques nominatifs en français. In A. Zribi-Hertz (Ed.), *Les Pronoms : morphologie, syntaxe et typologie* (pp. 57-99). Saint-Denis, France: Presses Universitaires Vincennes.

Lodge, R. (1993). *French : From dialect to standard*. London: Routledge.

Montalbetti, M. (1984). *After binding: On the interpretation of pronouns*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, MIT, Cambridge, MA.

Nadasdi, T. (1995). *Variation morphosyntaxique et langue minoritaire: Le cas du français ontarien*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Toronto.

Ossipov, Hélène. (1990). *A GPSG analysis of doubling and dislocation constructions in French*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Pierce, A. (1992). *Language Acquisition and Syntactic Theory*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Roberge, Y. (1986). Subject doubling, free inversion, and null argument languages. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics, 37*, 55-79.

Roberge, Y. (1990). *The syntactic recoverability of null arguments*. Kingston & Montreal: McGill University Press.

Schwegler, Armin. (1990). *Analyticity and syntheticity: A diachronic perspective with special reference to Romance languages*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Smith, J. (1994). *A morphosyntactic analysis of the verb group in Cajun French*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle.

Zwicky, A., & Pullum, G. (1983). Cliticization vs. inflection: *n't*. *Language, 59*, 502-513.