

# QUOI, T'AS PAS FACEBOOK?

## *evolving French negation in social media*

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Social media provides its users with a myriad of benefits: easy event planning, communication with old friends, instant messaging, and, of course, a convenient medium by which to share all of the mundane vicissitudes of modern life. Yet within this innocent sea of friends' photographs and enemies' status updates, a linguistic revolution is constantly under way. Every living language, naturally, is evolving. But in French, and in social media, that evolution becomes identifiable, perhaps even traceable. By focusing on one element in the language of social media—that ubiquitous *ne...pas* we all encountered in Elementary French—linguistic researchers can uncover a very specific shift in usage within French's overall grammatical system.

The formation of negatives in contemporary French has been a question of considerable debate, as the system of French negation seems to be in a state of flux. Fortunately, contemporary social media offers us the unique opportunity to view large “snapshots” of colloquial language at any given moment in time. With this tool at our disposal, it is possible to tease out the nature of French negation. This paper seeks to establish the preferred method of negation—preverbal, postverbal, or double-marked—in spoken French. From there, it will seek to determine what typological consequences, if any, might arise from this preferred method of negation, vis-à-vis the position of question words in content questions. Social media—specifically, Facebook comments—provides the perfect source of data for this sort of investigation. Comments are spontaneous, colloquial, and often reflective of preferred speech patterns. One glance through a photo album can reveal a kaleidoscope of conflicting forms, each competing for linguistic space within an individual's grammar. But before delving into such deep waters, we must first determine what it is about French negation that makes it so prickly for its speakers.

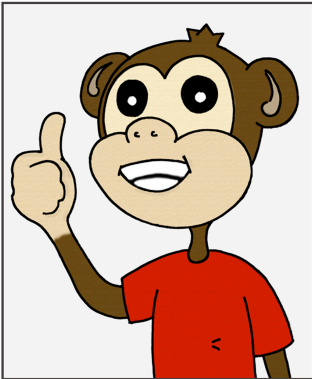
The French language has the rather unique characteristic of being monitored by an institution; the Académie Française was founded in 1635 as “France's official authority on the usages, vocabulary, and grammar of the French language, although its recommendations carry no legal power.”<sup>1</sup> Under the influence of such an institution, as well as the weight of hundreds of years of well-documented literary history, it comes as little surprise that the French language often finds itself suspended between “correct” forms and colloquial forms, with many speakers making use of both in everyday speech. For the purposes of this paper, negation in literary or official texts will be ignored, as such texts will almost always necessarily adhere to the rules of Standard French and not demonstrate the state of flux that we are interested in. Young Facebook users, fortunately, are not terribly concerned about what the Académie Française thinks of their grammar.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academie\\_francaise](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academie_francaise). Retrieved 09-23-2011.

# #NEG

facespace



Harry Monkey


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What, then, constitutes Standard French negation? A casual glance into any contemporary French grammar book reveals that French negation is double-marked, with negative element *ne* followed by another negative word; *pas* is most commonly used, but other possibilities include *rien* ('nothing'), *aucun* ('none'), *plus* ('no longer'), etc.<sup>2</sup> The negative elements generally surround the finite verb. Thus:

- (a) j' ai mangé hier  
 1<sup>S</sup> AUX+1<sup>S</sup> eat+PART yesterday  
 'I ate yesterday.'
- (b) je n' ai pas mangé hier  
 1<sup>S</sup> NEG AUX+1<sup>S</sup> NEG eat+PART yesterday  
 "I didn't eat yesterday.'

Historically, however, this wraparound negation has not been the standard method of marking negative sentences. Paul Rowlett gives us the following useful (albeit rather simplified) chart of sentential negation through history:

- (c) Jeo ne di → 1600  
 Je ne dis (pas) 1600 - 1700  
 Je ne dis pas written  
 Je (ne) dis pas spoken  
 Je dis pas colloquial<sup>3</sup>  
 'I do not say.'

This chart demonstrates that contemporary colloquial French has reinterpreted adverbial *pas* as a negative marker; and, indeed, that this reinterpretation was already beginning to take place in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is worthy of note, however, that although this trend has been under development for several hundred years, it is only in the last two centuries that there has been a marked rise in deletion of *ne*. Supporting this claim is the work of France Martineau<sup>4</sup>, who notes that the frequency of *ne*-deletion in sentential contexts jumped from 1.5% to 24.0% between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Continuing the trend, *ne*-deletion in sentential contexts was listed at a 31.9% frequency in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While this alone is not enough evidence to support *pas* as the primary negative particle, at least as interpreted by French speakers, it may be helpful when considered in conjunction with other data. It seems, indeed, that *pas* carries the lion's share of semantic weight in negative marking.

Consider, for instance, imperative sentences. Standard French demands the *ne...pas* surrounding the conjugated verb:

- (d) ne lache pas la corde  
 NEG let go+IMP NEG DEF+Fem rope  
 'Don't let go of the rope!'

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix I, examples (i)-(iii)

<sup>3</sup> Rowlett, Paul. Sentential Negation in French. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 42

<sup>4</sup> Martineau, France. "Modeling Change: A Historical Sociolinguistics Perspective on French Negation." Corpus Analysis and Variation in Linguistics. Vol. 1. Ed. Yuji Kawaguchi et al. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009. Pp. 159-176.

However, colloquial French easily deletes *ne* in this situation, as demonstrated below:

- (e) Lache pas la corde!

Despite this, it is impossible to delete *pas* without upsetting the grammaticality of the statement. Thus,

- (f) \*Ne lache la corde!

is ungrammatical. This evidence seems to point to *pas* as the carrier of the most semantic weight in the negative sentence; indeed, *ne* is interpreted as so loosely negative that its appearance alone in an imperative sentence is not enough to negate the command. In addition to this, even constructions that seem most strongly to require the *ne...pas* construction are able to undergo *ne*-deletion. For instance:

- (g) n' est- il pas beau?  
 NEG be +3SPres 3SMasc NEG handsome  
 'Isn't he handsome?'  
 (h) ?Est-il pas beau?  
 (i) \*N'est-il beau?

Example (h), although existing at the limits of grammaticality, is nevertheless acceptable for a French speaker, even if a bit unusual. By contrast, example (i) is nearly unintelligible in its communicative intent. It seems near impossible, in fact, to find data in which *ne...pas* cannot be replaced with *pas* alone while still retaining its original meaning; it is even less likely to find examples in which *ne* alone carries the weight of negation.

The distribution of *ne...pas* and *pas* in colloquial speech and writing provide some interesting insights into the movement of the language. In particular, there seems to be a correlation between the person features of the subject and the likelihood of *ne*-deletion—that is, postverbal *pas* as the only negative marker. In a convenience sample of 77 Facebook comments containing negative sentential elements, sentences with explicit structures<sup>5</sup> (j) or first-person subjects (k) were more likely to contain *ne*-deletion, while sentences with 3rd-person subjects (l) were slightly more likely to retain the *ne* in their negative constructions.<sup>6</sup>

- (j) c' est pas madame qui avale le  
 3S be.3SPres NEG madam REL swallow.3SPres DEF  
 reste (...) ?  
 rest  
 'Isn't it [the] Mrs. who swallows the rest?'  
 (k) je parlais pas de ton pseudo (...)  
 1S talk+1SPastImp NEG of 2S.GEN pseudo(nym)  
 'I wasn't talking about your pseudonym.'

<sup>5</sup> These are defined as either *c'est* or *il y a*, translating roughly to 'it is' and 'there is,' respectively. All tenses of the verb *être* 'to be' were included in the analysis.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix I, Fig. 1

- (l) ma semaine n' a pas  
 1S.GEN week NEG AUX.3S NEG  
 encore commencé (...)  
 yet start+PART  
 'My week hasn't started yet.'

In fact, 3rd-person sentences were the only data group to have a higher probability of *ne...pas* constructions than *ne*-deletion; in all other contexts, *pas* alone was preferred. This is interesting relative to Hans H. Hock's principle of "basicness," where he states that "third person forms are more basic than the forms of other persons."<sup>7</sup> The basicness of a particular form, furthermore, "seems to enable it to resist leveling." That is, basic forms tend to be more resistant to analogical change than other forms. This is consistent with the data presented, which demonstrates a general trend towards preference of postverbal negation rather than double marked *ne...pas* negation; the most "resistant" segment of this trend is also the most basic 3<sup>rd</sup>-person form, which nevertheless does show evidence of succumbing to *ne*-deletion. Interestingly, the pattern of negation seems to have little to do with the hierarchy of animacy. The highest concentrations of *ne...pas* negatives, for instance, occurred in the categories of 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person and inanimate subjects. Because these are at opposite ends of the Animacy Hierarchy, the data suggests that there is no correlation between the animacy of the subject and the likelihood of a particular form of negation.

On the basis of these data, it seems that French, although in flux, is headed in the direction of postverbal negation. Granted this, can we deduce any further correlations from this apparent change? According to Lehmann's constituent order correlations, a language with *verb + negative* constructions is also more likely to have noninitial question words. Let us see whether this trend manifests itself in our colloquial French data as well.

Standard French places content question words at the beginning of the phrase; the rest of the clause can then be formed using either inversion (m) or an *est-ce que* construction (o).<sup>8</sup>

- (m) où vas tu?  
 WHERE go+2SPres 2S  
 'Where are you going?'
- (n) où est-ce que tu vas  
 WHERE est-ce que 2S go+2SPres  
 'Where are you going?'  
 lit. 'Where is it that you are going?'

Modern colloquial French, however, is considerably more complicated. Alongside the standard constructions described above, it is also possible to leave question words *in situ*<sup>9</sup> or to focus the question words in a *c'est* ('it is') construction at the beginning of the clause (o). This construction parallels

<sup>7</sup> Hock, Hans Heinrich. *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991. Pp. 215-220.

<sup>8</sup> Siskin, H. Jay et al. *Débuts: An Introduction to French*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. p.100

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix I, (iv)

a similar, and very common, process of focusing in declarative sentences (p).

- (o) *c'*        *est*                                **qui**        *la*                                *veste*  
*it*        *be+3SPres*                                WHO        *DET+Fem*                                *jacket*  
*bleu ciel*                                *derrière?*  
*sky-blue*                                *behind*  
 'Who is the blue jacket in the back?'
- (p) *c'*        *est*                                *gai*        *ce*        *jeu*  
*it*        *be.3SPres*                                *fun*        *DEM*        *game*  
 'This game is fun.'  
 lit. 'It is fun, this game.'

For the purpose of data collection of content question words, therefore, examples such as that in example (o) were listed as “unclear”: although the question word is focused (and, consequently, fronted) by the *c'est* construction, it nonetheless remains *in situ* if we assume a declarative sentence such as (p) to be the underlying form. It is outside the scope of this paper to determine whether the content question is derived from a “focused” sentence—and thus remains *in situ* in the interrogative—or whether the focusing itself functions as question formation and thus demonstrates a kind of fronting.

Having excluded such data, as well as data in which the content question functions as the subject of a sentence,<sup>10</sup> we find that in a sample of 31 relevant pieces of data, 18 represented sentences with a fronted question word, while 13 represented sentences where the question word remained *in situ*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, although fronting remains the preferred method of question formation, content question words *in situ* represent a significant portion of attested language data.

The distribution of these sentences is also of some interest. Questions asking *why* are always fronted, while question words asking *when* or functioning as the object of prepositions are more likely to remain *in situ*. Finally, questions asking for a direct object are only slightly more likely to be fronted than to remain *in situ*, but both possibilities are used freely, even in identical contexts. The following examples come from two different informants commenting on a picture:<sup>12</sup>

- (q) *tu*        *regardais*                                **quoi?**  
*2S*        *watch+2SImp*                                WHAT  
 'What were you watching?'
- (r) **qu'**        *est-ce que*                                *tu*        *regardais?*  
 WHAT        *est-ce que*                                *2S*        *watch+2SImp*  
 'What were you watching?'  
 lit. 'What is it that you were watching?'

<sup>10</sup> Content question words which would function as subjects in their corresponding declarative sentences are moot, since the question word would appear in the same place if fronted as it would if *in situ*.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix I, Fig. 2

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix I, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 for graphic representations of this data.

By contrast, *why* can only be fronted in an interrogative sentence, never remain *in situ*:

- (s) **pourquoi**            on            est            tous            moches            sur  
       WHY                2Pl<sup>13</sup>        be+3S        all            ugly            on  
       cette    photo?  
       DEM    photo  
       ‘Why are we all ugly on this photo?’

With little typological research done in content questions, it is difficult to make a claim as to why this distribution should take place; assuming, of course, that such a small sample is representative of a general trend. It is possible that *pourquoi* is always fronted because its answer requires a longer, or “heavier” constituent. Consequently, the location of the question word is less susceptible to analogical change. By contrast, objects of prepositions are often single constituents and thus easier to keep *in situ*. Furthermore, French requires pied piping to take place when prepositions are fronted; this extra element of movement could be motivation for the entire prepositional phrase to remain *in situ* instead.

With a linguistic system so tied up in historical usage, it comes as little surprise that even native French users seem downright schizophrenic in their grammatical usage. As social media grows in power, French is increasingly becoming the property of the people—not of the Académie. Sites like Facebook can take colloquial language and immortalize it; the only task remaining is to sift through and see what our contemporary, populist linguists have to say. Without even realizing it, fluent French speakers (or, rather, French typers) are creating a massive database chronicling their own linguistic fluctuations, just waiting to be analyzed by intrepid linguists. A self-perpetuating, endlessly creative source of linguistic data describing the massive tidal shifts of language? That’s not a bad deal, particularly for a silly website filled with pictures of cats.

#### WORKS CITED

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<sup>13</sup> Although *on* is an impersonal pronoun in French, similar to English *one*, it is almost always used in colloquial French as a substitute for the 2Pl form *nous*. The verb, however, agrees with the grammatical features of *on* (3S) rather than its semantic features (2Pl).