

When a vanishing particle fails to vanish

In an important longitudinal study of French, Ashby has shown that the use of the negative particle *ne* was in rapid decline by the end the 20th century. Table 1 shows a 50% reduction – from 52% to 25% -- among older adult residents of Tours over a 20 year period. As expected with a vigorous change from below, the 1976 data showed women to be considerably in the lead.

Age Group	1976	1995
51 - 64	52%	25%
14 - 22	19%	14%

Table 1. Percentage of *ne* used by younger and older speakers in Tours, France, in 1976 and 1995 (based on Ashby 1981; 2001).

This picture places spoken French somewhere between the second and third stages of Jespersen's cycle (1917), i.e., between the two-part negation in Stage 2, and the wearing away of the first part in Stage 3. One might expect French in the 21st century to progress fully into the third stage, attested in many languages, which would involve the loss of *ne*. This stage has largely been reached in Québécois French, where 60 speakers from the 1971 sociolinguistic study of Montreal were very close to eliminating *ne*. In over 12,000 negative sentences, Sankoff and Vincent (1977) found a rate of omission greater than 99.6%.

Given the extremely low frequency of *ne*, it might be expected that longitudinal research in the same community several decades later would show *ne* finally succumbing to the blocking principle (Williams 1997) and disappearing. An examination of speakers recorded in 1984 and 1995 reveals that this has not happened. Results of a panel study show that speakers with very sporadic use of *ne* in 1971 (1 token, or none at all) were likely to show equally sporadic use in later periods. However, those speakers who used it even as little as 2 or 3 times were likely to show increased use in later life. A 20 year old student in 1971, "Georges N." used *ne* at a rate of 1.4% (N=143). As a 33 year old middle manager in a large corporation, married with two children and his MBA partly completed in 1984, his rate was 6.1% (N=214), an increase significant at the .05 level.

As with the use of inflected futures (Sankoff & Wagner in press), *ne* shows (1) an important age grading component, and (2) large effects of social class and education. A majority of speakers (approximately 75%) were never observed to use *ne*, but the 25% who did tended to be older, of a higher social class and education. Unlike the case of inflected futures, however, *ne* involves a strong stylistic component, and its association with formal topics (particularly language and education) remains robust over the 24 year time span of this longitudinal study. As a "superposed" feature (Gumperz 1968), use of *ne* appears to be late learned and reinforced by its association with the written language.

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