

When change fails: evidence from French

INTRODUCTION: In this paper I focus on a series of pronouns found in French between the 12th and the 16th centuries. These pronouns pose a theoretical challenge as they bear a strong morphology (*moy, toy, soy*, etc.), which differentiates them from clitics, yet they appear in a derived position, like clitics. This construction only concerns infinitival complements as exemplified in (1) and (2).

- (1) *Vous auriez tort de moy faire desplaisir.*
you would.have wrong to me make.INF displeasure
“You would be wrong to make me unhappy.”
- (2) *et pour cuider qu’il deust soy appaisier.*
and for believe.INF that-he must REFL appease.INF
“and to believe that he had to appease himself.”

This construction has been described (Moignet 1970, Pearce 1990, de Kok 1993, Roberts 1997) but it is yet to receive a formal analysis. The sporadic occurrences of clitics in the immediate periphery of the infinitive are traditionally attributed to a preference for the use of pre-infinitival strong pronouns when clitic climbing is not possible (Moignet 1970, Robert 1997). This hypothesis is supported by the obligatoriness of clitic climbing until ca. 1600 (Martineau 1990). Nevertheless, recent research has shown that clitics could cliticise on infinitives from the earliest periods on (Olivier 2022), which challenges this view. The objectives of this paper are (a) to present a quantitative report of the evolution of such pronouns, (b) to characterise their nature, (c) to provide a formal analysis of the construction and (d) to account for their loss.

METHODOLOGY: I have created and manually tagged a corpus of legal texts from 1150 to 1856. The construction under focus is attested between the 12th and the 16th centuries, therefore I will limit the discussion to this timeframe. I counted 66 occurrences. This is extremely low compared to the number of enclisis and proclisis (Table 1); and it dismisses the traditional hypothesis that clitics are banned in this context.

ENCLISIS	PROCLISIS	CLITIC CLIMBING	PRE-INFINITIVAL PRONOUN
190	486	1,414	66

Table 1: Distribution of pronouns in the corpus (12th-16th c.)

In restructuring clauses, the pronoun is almost always a clitic and climbs. I have counted two occurrences where the pronoun does not climb and remains strong, see example (2). This construction is extremely rare. In non-restructuring clauses, there is no particular environment that appears to favour the presence of a pre-infinitival pronoun instead of a clitic.

ANALYSIS: DP objects can precede and follow infinitives in Old French (de Kok 1993: 261).

The pronouns under focus are strictly pre-infinitival, which evidences that they appear in a derived position. I propose that their hybridity (they are not clitics but they appear in a derived position) can be explained alongside Cardinaletti & Starke’s (1999) tripartition, namely that they are Weak Pronouns (WP). Being phrases, WPs target a specifier, which I take to be that of vP. This construction is present for a limited amount of time (4 centuries) and in low quantities (Table 1). Put informally, it exposes a change that is not *successful* in the diachrony. Failed changes are reported cross-linguistically (Postma 2010, Meyer 2020, Ringe & Yang 2022), and they are cases where a new construction is either rapidly reanalysed, or where it is challenged by another construction. I will propose that the latter is true for French, with the rise of proclisis. Infinitival proclisis appears only a century after we first observe the construction under focus here, which rapidly overshadowed the innovative use of WPs in the 12th century. The two constructions are linearly identical and clitics were favoured during acquisition. Further, clitic climbing becomes optional in restructuring clauses towards the end of the 16th century (Olivier 2022) which substantially increases the acquirers’ exposure to proclisis. This pivotal moment connects to the loss of WPs in the corpus.

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