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Accounting for Change: The Evolution of Null Objects in Medieval French

The talk will report new findings on the distribution of null objects in the diachrony of French, focusing on the end of the medieval period (13th – 15th C). Medieval French has long been mentioned as a language which allowed the anaphoric object to be left unpronounced in different syntactic environments (see, a.o, Tobler, 1886; Jensen, 1990, or Donaldson, 2013). In medieval French, an object with an overt antecedent salient in the discourse can be left unpronounced in a variety of contexts, (as in (1)).

(1) a. Et   aloient   ja   porparlant   de quel   mort   il   Ø
       and   went   already   discussing   of what   death   they
       feroient   morir
       make.FUT   die
        'and they were already discussing how they would kill __' (*Aucassin & Nicolette*)

    b. si   le   baisa   et   Ø   acola
       thus him kissed   and   embraced
       'thus she kissed him and embraced _" (*Aucassin & Nicolette*)

    c. on   le   remenroit en le   vile   por   ardoir Ø
       one   her   took.back in the city   to   burn
       'they would take her back to the city to burn _' (*Aucassin & Nicolette*)

Based on data from narrative prose text, the talk will highlight some trends in the evolution of null objects in medieval French, marking the medieval period as a transition between a system allowing null objects (Latin) and a system dispreferring them (modern French). The starting hypothesis was that null objects would gradually become less frequent during the medieval period, and would become restricted to contexts in which they can still be observed, to a certain extent, in modern French. The data shows that while some contexts, like coordination, seem 'well-behaved' and follow the expected evolution (with a restriction of null objects to a specific structure of coordination), other contexts evolve more independently, with variation between the authors and the centuries. A tentative analysis will be proposed: the evolution of coordination stems from the transition of a system with a syntactic rule of omission in such contexts (Latin) to a system which no longer allows it and instead uses clitics (modern French). The evolution of the other contexts of omission (e.g., 1b, 1c) is different because such omissions were never bound to a syntactic rule but rather depended on the author.