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## **8. Historical morphology and syntax**

**Sophie Prévost**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Over the centuries, the morphology and syntax of French have undergone major upheavals with, among other changes, a loss of inflectional richness and a rigidification of the word order, the two phenomena being partly correlated. This chapter describes the main evolutions, without claiming to be exhaustive and leaving aside some of the less significant, albeit not minor, changes.

### **8.2 Morphology**

The morphological evolution of French is marked by the loss of inflectional richness in the verbal and nominal domains, the regularization and simplification of paradigms, and a general tendency to systematize functional oppositions, as in the case of demonstratives. It is also characterized by the constant coining of new adverbs, prepositions, and subordinating conjunctions, though probably less so in the two last centuries. The following sections present the main characteristics of these changes.

#### **8.2.1 Nominal categories**

In Modern French (ModF), nominal categories vary in number and, for some of them, in gender and person. Case variation now only concerns personal pronouns, whereas in Old French (OF) it concerned all nominal categories. Below, we consider nouns, adjectives, and articles in turn, followed by personal pronouns, demonstratives, and possessives.

##### **8.2.1.1 Nouns, adjectives, and definite articles**

Latin had a six-case system, which was reduced to two cases (three cases for personal pronouns) in OF: the nominative case, inherited from the Latin nominative, for the subject, the attribute and the apposition of the subject, and the apostrophe; and the oblique case, inherited from the Latin accusative, for all the other functions. However, this distinction applied mainly to masculine nouns, since feminine nouns no longer had a case distinction in the plural and most of them no longer had one in the singular either.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century hardly any French texts systematically respected the

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<sup>1</sup> There also existed a few masculine and feminine indeclinable nouns, in which final 's'/'z' belonged to the radical (*pais* 'country', *voiz* 'voice').

declension for nouns (and adjectives), whereas it was very strictly observed for pronouns, and still is today. It is customary to distinguish three declensions for masculine nouns. The first one (Table 8.1), which includes the majority of nouns, is characterized by the addition of an *-s* to the singular nominative case and to the plural oblique case, while the plural nominative case and the singular oblique case have zero marking. The addition of *-s* after certain consonants, especially dentals, palatals, or liquids, could lead to phonetic changes, such as the deletion of the final consonant (*drap/dras* ‘sheet’, *duc/dus* ‘duke’), its transformation (*pont/ponz* ‘bridge’) or an alteration of the stem (*cheval/chevaus* ‘horse’).<sup>2</sup>

Table 8.1: First masculine declension in OF

nom(inative) sg.	li mur-s		nom(inative) pl.	li mur-Ø
obl(ique) sg.	le mur-Ø		obl(ique) pl.	les mur-s

The second declension, which concerned only a few words ending in *-re* (*livre* ‘book’, *père* ‘father’, etc.), did not initially distinguish the nominative and oblique cases in the singular (zero marking), but an *-s* rapidly prevailed in the nominative, by analogy with the first declension. The third declension included some nouns denoting human beings and presenting stem alternation, with the nominative sg. case having a different stem from the other three cases,<sup>3</sup> and normally without *-s*: *ber/baron* (‘baron’), *compain/compagnon* (‘companion’), *emperere/empereror* (‘emperor’), *sire/seignor* (‘lord’). For feminine nouns, the distinction between nominative and oblique cases had disappeared in the early texts for most nouns, so that only the number inflection remains: *la feme/les femes* (‘woman/women’). A few feminine nouns, ending in a consonant or an *-é*, took an *-s* in the nominative singular case (*amor(s)* ‘love’, *bonté(s)* ‘goodness’), and a few nouns, like some masculine nouns, also exhibited stem alternation (*suer/seror* ‘sister’, *ante/antain* ‘aunt’, *pute/putain* ‘whore’), with sometimes the presence of an analogical *-s* in the nominative singular case (*suers* ‘sisters’).

Adjectives had also inherited a declension from Latin. Most of them were aligned in OF on the first nominative declension (nom.sg.masc.: *bons* ‘good’; obl.sg.masc.: *bon*; nom.pl.masc. *bon*; obl.pl.masc.: *bons*; nom./obl.sg.fem.: *bone*; nom./obl.pl.fem.: *bones*). A small number of high-frequency adjectives, called epicenes, coming from the third Latin declension (*grand* ‘large’, *fort* ‘strong’, *mortel* ‘mortal’, etc.), as well as present participles, did not differentiate

<sup>2</sup> See Buridant (2019: §51-2) for a detailed account of the phonetic changes resulting from the addition of *-s*.

<sup>3</sup> The alternation mostly resulted from stress shift in Latin: on the stem for the nominative sg., and on the following syllable for the other cases.

gender: the feminine lacked an inflectional *-e* (even if a few occurrences of a form with an *-e* can be found as early as the twelfth century: *grande*), and could be marked by an *-s* in the nom.sg, like the masculine (*grant + -s > granz*). Like the first declension, these adjectives distinguished nominative and oblique cases in the masculine plural (*grant/granz*), but not in the feminine (*granz*). Lastly, some synthetic comparative adjectives that had persisted in OF (which otherwise, like the other Romance languages, developed analytic comparative structures with the help of the adverbs *plus* ‘more’ and *moins* ‘less’) exhibited stem alternation: *graindre/graignor* (‘taller’), *pire/peior* (‘worse’), one of the forms having sometimes been preserved in ModF (*pire, meilleur* ‘better’, *moindre* ‘lesser’).

Masculine definite articles also distinguished case (see Table 8.1), using three forms: *li* (< *illi* and *illi* < *ille*), *le* (< *illu(m)*), that could be elided to *l’*, and *les* (< *illos*). In contrast, from the beginning of French there was no longer a case, but only a number, distinction in the feminine: *la* (< *illa(m)*) and *les* (< *illae/illas*). The types of enclisis were much more numerous in OF than in ModF: as well as *à* and *de*, the preposition *en* could be combined with the definite article (*el, eu, ou, es*), and there were numerous variants (e.g. *de + le > del, dou, du*, etc.). From the end of the thirteenth century, a series of changes began: decline of the enclitic forms with *en*, regression and then disappearance of variants with *de* (*del, dou*), and analogical remodelling of the forms with *à* (*as > aus/aux* modelled on *au* (*à + le*, a variant of *al*)). This evolution was almost complete by the fifteenth century, with ModF having only a few contracted forms: *du, des, au, aux*, and the rare form *ès*, restricted to a few specific contexts, such as *Docteur ès Sciences* (‘Doctor of Sciences’).<sup>4</sup>

Data show that as soon as texts began not respecting the case system scrupulously, it was almost always the oblique case that replaced the nominative case, and not the reverse (disappearance of the *-s* in the nom.sg.masc, and addition of an *-s* in the nom.pl.masc.). This change progressively intensified, but in an uneven manner, affecting first the dialects of the west in the north-western part of the country (Dees et al. 1980, 1987; Schøsler 1984), prose before verse, and direct speech before narrative (Schøsler 1984, 2013). The addition of the final *-e* to epicene feminine adjectives, which had started in the twelfth century, became widespread from the fourteenth century on (there is still a trace of these old forms in the formation of certain adverbs in *-ment*, built on the feminine form of the adjective (*genti-ment* ‘kindly’ vs. *forte-ment* ‘strongly’), and compound nouns (e.g. *grand-mère* ‘grandmother’). The case system survived a little longer for the article. The generalization of the oblique case

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed presentation of the items, in particular regional variants and clitic phenomena, see Buridant (2019: 141-3); Carlier (2020: 664-74).

was complete by the end of Middle French (MidF): nouns now only had number opposition, adjectives had number and gender opposition (except for those ending in *-e*: *sévère* ‘severe’), and articles had number as well as gender opposition in the singular. For nouns with stem alternation, it was most often the long form that was preserved, but the two forms have sometimes remained until ModF, usually with semantic nuances (*copain* ‘friend’, *compagnon* ‘companion’) although not always (*pute/putain* ‘whore’). As a result of the muting of the final *-s* of plural nouns (see Chapter 7, this volume) in spoken French, number is now marked only on the article (except for a few nouns which have kept a sg./pl. stem alternation: *chevall/chevaux*), and via liaison [z] if the following noun or adjective begins with a vowel.

The disappearance of the case system was probably due to several factors: the absence of a case distinction for most feminine nouns; the ambiguity of the markers for most masculine nouns; the generalization of determiners which retained a case distinction longer (even if this was also eventually swept away); and the gradual fixing of word order. Since the latter phenomenon was also, conversely, interpreted as a consequence of the disappearance of declension, the hypothesis of a mutual reinforcement of the two cannot be excluded (see 8.3.2.1).<sup>5</sup> As for the success of the oblique case over the nominative case, the hypothesis commonly put forward is that of its greater frequency (Foulet 1930 [1919]), even if this has been relativized (Schøsler 2020: 649).

### 8.2.1.2 Personal pronouns

From the very beginning, French possessed a complete system of personal pronouns. The first and second persons sg. and pl. (1P/2P/4P/5P) were inherited from Latin personal pronouns, while—since Latin did not have a 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun set—the 3<sup>rd</sup> person forms (3P/6P) were inherited from the Latin demonstrative *ILLE*, and the reflexive pronoun was derived from the Latin reflexive pronoun *se*. The pronominal system also had a declension that distinguished person, gender, number, and case (nominative, direct oblique, indirect oblique) from the beginning. These features that have been preserved in ModF, whereas nouns, adjectives, and articles have lost the case distinction.

With the exception of the 4P/5P forms *nos/vos* (> *nous/vous* in the thirteenth century), always unstressed,<sup>6</sup> oblique pronouns had differentiated forms from the outset, i.e. a stressed form (generally after the verb) and an unstressed form (before the verb); the latter could be

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<sup>5</sup> For an approach setting this evolution in a broader perspective, see Carlier and Combettes (2015).

<sup>6</sup> *Nos/vos* are undifferentiated as to function (subject or oblique), but, as subjects, they are stressed.

cliticized (*ne + le > nel*, which has disappeared; *je le + aim(e) > je l'aime*, which has survived). The 1P/2P and reflexive 3P forms underwent very few changes: from the start, they opposed *me* to *mei/moi*, *te* to *tei/toi* and *se* to *sei/soi*, with the *-oi* forms beginning to prevail over those in *-ei* from the thirteenth century onwards. The situation was more complex for the 3P forms derived from the demonstrative ILLE. In the singular, there were three unstressed forms: obl.dir.masc. *lo/le* (*le* prevailed over *lo* from the eleventh century); obl.dir.fem. *la*; and obl.indir.masc./fem. *li*, which was rivalled from the fourteenth century and eventually replaced in the fifteenth century by *lui*. There were also two stressed forms for the obl.dir./indir. cases: *lui*, in the masculine, and *li* (*lei*, *lié*) in the feminine. This latter form started to be replaced by *ele/elle* from the end of the thirteenth century, a change that was completed in the fifteenth century (before then, fem. *li* or *ele/elle* could be occasionally replaced by *lui*). Lastly, for 6P, from the beginning the unstressed forms *les* (obl.dir.) and *lor/leur* (obl.indir.) were used without any distinction of gender, while the stressed forms were distinguished according to gender, but not according to syntactic function (direct and indirect uses): masc. *els > eus* (> *eux*) and fem. *eles > elles*.<sup>7</sup>

In the nominative case there was only one series for all uses, unstressed or stressed, depending on the context, until the eleventh century. However, from the twelfth century onwards, a stressed form, *gié* or *jou*, appeared for 1P, along with elided forms (absent until then): *j'*, *g'*, and 'neutral' forms: *je*, *jo*, *jeo*, etc. Between the ninth and the fourteenth century about forty forms were recorded (Marchello-Nizia 2015, 2020a: 679-80), most of them able to cliticize with the oblique pronoun (*jou + les > jous*, etc.). The range of available forms started to decline in the thirteenth century in favour of *je*. Note that *tu* (2P) could also be elided before a vowel (*t'*) until the sixteenth century, a possibility that remains in colloquial speech (*t'es où?* 'you're where?'). The 3P masculine pronoun *il* sometimes took the form *el* in Early Old French (EOF) and could also be reduced to *i* (as in ModF). The evolution of the feminine pronoun *ele* (sometimes abbreviated to *el* until the fifteenth century) to *elle* began in the thirteenth century and ended in the fifteenth century, parallel to that of the oblique form. In the plural, the feminine form *eles* (sometimes replaced by the form *il(s)*, or spelt *els/eus* in western dialects) followed the same chronology as *ele* as far as spelling was concerned (> *elles*). Finally, the 6P pronoun *il* began to take an *-s* in the second half of the thirteenth century, with *ils* coexisting with *ilz* in the fourteenth century, before becoming established in the sixteenth century. While pronouns in the nominative case could be stressed and enjoyed

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<sup>7</sup> See Buridant (2019: 609), Marchello-Nizia (2020a: 676-7, 687-8) for lists of oblique forms in OF. Both also provide lists of nominative forms.

syntactic autonomy (see examples (1)-(3) in 8.3.1.1), all but 4P/5P forms and *elle(s)* started to lose these two features from the thirteenth century onwards, and to be cliticized. This phenomenon became more pronounced in MidF, and was completed in the seventeenth century, when they were gradually replaced by the stressed oblique form in all uses requiring syntactic autonomy, namely coordination (*il et son frere* > *lui et son frère* ‘he and his brother’), determination (*il meïsmes* > *lui-même* ‘he himself’), *il qui...* > *lui qui*), and single-word utterances.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the pronoun *on*. Originally a noun (nom.: *huem, hom, om*, etc. ‘man’), from the eleventh century onwards it acquired the status of indefinite pronoun, always as a subject. It could also, from the beginning of OF, be used with different person values (equivalence with *nous* being the most frequent),<sup>8</sup> while keeping its singular verb agreement, whether it had the status of an indefinite or personal pronoun: *nous, on part* (‘we, we leave’) (Winter-Froemel 2012; Marchello-Nizia 2020a: 682-4, 689-92; Prévost 2020a).

### 8.2.1.3 Demonstratives

The demonstrative system has undergone the most significant changes since the beginning of French, from a morphological and morphosyntactic point of view. OF had two paradigms, the forms in CIST, derived from *ISTE* and the forms in CIL derived from *ILLE* (see Table 8.2).<sup>9</sup>

Table 8.2: Demonstratives in OF

		CIST	CIL
MASCULINE	nom.sg.	cist	cil
	obl.dir.sg.	cest	cel
	obl.ind.sg.	cestui	celui
	nom.pl.masc.	cist	cil
	obl.pl. masc.	cez	cels, ceus
FEMININE	nom.sg.fem	ceste	cele
	obl.dir.sg.	ceste	cele
	obl.ind.sg.	cesti	celi
	nom.pl.	cestes, cez	celes
	obl.pl.	cestes, cez	celes

There was also a neuter form *ce* (*ço, ceo*, etc.), a survival of the Latin series *HIC*. All these forms could be prefixed with *-i*, giving *icist, icest*, etc. The forms of the two paradigms could

<sup>8</sup> *On* has largely replaced subject *nous* in Modern spoken French (see Chapter 2, this volume).

<sup>9</sup> Marchello-Nizia (2015: 117); Guillot-Barbance (2020a: 693). We leave here dialectal variants aside.

fulfil the function of determiner or pronoun and were semantically opposed: the CIST forms identified a referent standing in a proximal position/relation towards the speaker/subject while the CIL forms identified a referent in a distant position/relation towards the speaker/subject.<sup>10</sup> Spreading over five centuries, the functional differentiation began as early as the thirteenth century (Marchello-Nizia 1995: 115-44; Guillot-Barbance 2020a: 693-8) : there was a progressive specialization of the two forms and the emergence of the masculine plural determiner *ces*, resulting from the reduction of *cez* and *cels*, which then spread to the feminine. By analogy with definite articles *li/le/les*, a paradigm of unstressed demonstrative determiners was created, in which emerged, alongside *ces*, the singular form *ce* (and *cis* temporarily). This new paradigm of unstressed determiners (*cis/ce/ces*) coexisted with the polyfunctional demonstrative forms. The progressive restructuring of the demonstrative system eventually led to the functional specialization of a subset of demonstratives, as either determiner or pronoun, and to the disappearance of many other forms. 3P personal pronouns played an important role in the development of the demonstrative pronoun paradigm, and the forms that became established can be compared with the stressed 3P pronoun forms: *lui/celui, eux/ceux, elle/celle*, etc. All the modern pronouns come from the CIL series, many forms of which have been lost, whereas the determiners *cet/cette* come from the CIST series, most of which have also been lost. Determiners became unstressed due to the shift from word stress to group stress. The modern system was established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The determiner forms in CIL disappeared first, while the stabilization of pronouns was slower: *cettui-ci/la* was still found as a pronoun in the seventeenth century, when the prefixed forms finally disappeared. The suffixed forms (*ce N-ci, celui-la*) appeared as early as the thirteenth century, and somehow compensated for the loss of the original semantic (proximal/distal) opposition between the two series (*ceste (dame) > cette dame-ci/celle-ci / cele (dame) > cette dame-là/celle-là*), their development being favoured by the emergence of a group-final stress to emphasize the important element: *-ci/-là* (De Mulder et al. 2011).

#### 8.2.1.4 Possessives

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<sup>10</sup> *Se voz de ceste ne voz poéz oster, Je voz ferai celle teste coper (Ami Amile, v. 752-3, example in Marchello-Nizia 2003): 'If you cannot keep away from this one, I will have that head cut'. This one refers to the speaker's daughter, who he cherishes, and that head refers to the lover's, who he dislikes. The semantic distinction between the two series has given rise to numerous approaches and studies. See Marchello-Nizia (1995: 129-39), which presents the different approaches, especially that of Kleiber (1987); Marchello-Nizia (2006); Guillot-Barbance and Marchello-Nizia (2015); Guillot-Barbance (2020b).*



In addition to the features classically encoded by possessives (possessed/possessor), in OF there was a case distinction between nominative and oblique cases and strong dialectal variation, resulting in a very large number of forms. The evolution of the possessive system resulted in a series of simplifications and analogical remodelling, of which only the main features are given here (see Marchello-Nizia 2020b for more details). There were two paradigms in OF. The first included unstressed forms that functioned as determiners and showed a case distinction in the masculine: nom.sg.: *mes/tes/ses/nostre(s)/vostre(s)/lor, leur*; obl.sg.: *mon/ton/son/nostre/vostre/lor, leur*; nom.pl.: *mi/ti/si/nostre/vostre/lor, leur*; obl.pl. *mes/tes/ses/nostres, noz, nos/votres, voz, vos/lor, leur*. In the feminine, the case distinction had already disappeared in the earliest texts, and only the number distinction remained in OF: *ma/ta/sa/notre/vostre/lor, leur* in the singular and *mes/tes/ses/nostres, nos, noz/votres, vos, voz/lor, leur* in the plural. The second paradigm included stressed forms, used as pronouns or adjectives. For the masculine: nom.sg.: *miens/tuens/suens/nostre(s)/vostre(s)/lor, leur*; obl.sg.: *mien/tuen/suen/nostre/vostre/lor, leur*; nom.pl.: *mien/tuen/suen/nostre/vostre/lor, leur*; obl.pl. *miens/tuens/suens/nostres/votres/lor, leur*. For the feminine, which had only an opposition in number: *moie, meie/toue/soue/nostre/vostre/lor, leur* in the singular and *moies, meies/toues/soues/nostres/votres/lor, leur* in the plural. From the second half of the twelfth century, the stem of the stressed forms of 2P and 3P aligned in the masculine with that of 1P: *tuen/suen > tien/sien*. A similar change took place a century later in the feminine: *toue/soue > toie/soie*; then, in the fourteenth century, these forms aligned with the masculine stem: *mienne/tienne/sienne*. In addition, in the fourteenth century the unstressed feminine form *ma/ta/sa*, which was elided before a vowel (*m'amie*), was replaced in this context by the masculine form (*mon amie*), and *lor/leur* began to take an *-s* in the plural. At the same time, due to the general disappearance of the case system, the nominative forms disappeared in favour of the oblique forms, while the dialectal variants were gradually eliminated. By the fifteenth century, the modern paradigm was in place, with the exception of the evolution of the stressed forms *nostre/vostre > nôtre/vôtre* which only took place in the seventeenth century. Finally, it should be noted that the use of stressed forms as adjectives started to decline in the seventeenth century and disappeared in the nineteenth century, surviving only in an archaic usage (*un sien cousin* 'a cousin of his', *il est mien* 'he is mine').

### 8.2.2 Verbs

Compared to the nominal inflectional system which had already been greatly simplified between Latin and French, the OF verb system remained morphologically very rich. Two types of changes took place from the beginning of French: phonetic evolutions and analogical remodelling, the latter leading to a simplification of paradigms. It is not possible to summarize here the many changes that occurred; we will only mention a few of them, referring the reader to Buridant (2019: 335-418) for OF, Marchello-Nizia (1997 [1979]: 253-85) for MidF, and Bazin-Tachella (2020) for more details.

French presents major innovations compared to Latin. Some paradigms have disappeared (deponent verbs,<sup>11</sup> several non-finite verb forms including the future infinitive) or merged with each other (viz. gerund and present participle, cf. Vangaever 2021), while others have appeared, such as the future tense (*chanterai*, ‘I will sing’, *chanteras*, ‘you will sing’, etc.), which does not come from the Latin future tense (*cantabo*), but from a verbal locution used in spoken Late Latin (*cantare habeo* ‘to sing I have’), which was progressively grammaticalized. The imperfect subjunctive (*chantasse*) comes from the Latin pluperfect subjunctive (*cantauissem*), while the synthetic forms of the Latin indicative and pluperfect subjunctive (*cantaueram* and *cantauissem*) were replaced by analytical forms with auxiliaries (*j’avais chanté/j’eusse chanté*). Lastly, new verb tenses, that did not exist in Latin, were created by grammaticalization, and are attested from the earliest texts: the compound past (‘passé composé’) and the conditional (*sostendreiet* ‘would endure’, *Eulalie*, 881, v. 16<sup>12</sup>). These two paradigms—like the future tense—use the new auxiliary *avoir*, derived from *habere* (‘to have’), which appears on the end of the infinitive for the future tense and the conditional, and has remained in the compound past (*ai chanté*).

There has always been an opposition in French between strong paradigms, in which the stress shifts between stem and inflection (*viens/venons* ‘I come/we come’), and weak paradigms, with stress on the inflection for all persons (*chante/chantons*). In OF, there were strong paradigms for the present indicative and the subjunctive, the imperative, and the simple past, which have been partly preserved. In the present indicative and the present subjunctive, the stress was on the stem for 1P/2P/3P/6P, resulting in diphthongs (or vowel alternations), and on the inflection for 4P/5P. This stress shift resulted in many alternations: e.g. *il set/nos savons* (‘know’), *lieve/levons* (‘raise’), *croit/creons* (‘believe’), *prie/proions* (‘pray’). Other alternations resulted from the weakening of the pretonic vowel: *achate/achetons* (‘buy’), or from the syncope of the pretonic vowel: *parole/parlons* (‘talk’), *desjune/disnons* (‘have first

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<sup>11</sup> A Latin deponent verb is passive in form but active in meaning.

<sup>12</sup> The references of the examples are listed at the end of the chapter.

meal’); in some cases, 1P had a specific stem *je muir/ tu muers/ nos morons* (‘die’). Very early on, there was a tendency to regularize paradigms, which intensified in MidF and was complete by the seventeenth century: verbs were remodelled on one of the two stems, often the unstressed one. Several alternations have nevertheless been preserved (sometimes with modifications) in ModF (*dois/devons* ‘must’, *viens/venons* ‘come’, *bois/buvons* ‘drink’, etc.), occasionally giving rise to two different verbs (*dîner/déjeuner* ‘dine/have lunch’).

In the simple past in OF, there was an opposition between, on the one hand, the ‘weak’ past tenses, without any verb stem alternation, such as the verbs of the 1<sup>st</sup> group (infinitive in *-er*), many verbs in *-ir* (*partir* ‘leave’ : *parti/partis/parti(t)/partimes/partistes/partirent*), and some verbs in *-re* (*perdre* ‘lose’). On the other hand, there were the ‘strong’ past tenses, with stem alternation between 1P/3P/6P, where the stress fell on the stem, and 2P/4P/5P which were stressed on the ending. Three main types can be distinguished: the *-i* type (*tenir* ‘hold’: *tin/tenis/tint/tenimes/tenistes/tin(d)rent*); the *-s* type (*faire* ‘do’: *fis/fesis/fist/fesimes/fesistes/firent*); and the *-u* type (*avoir* ‘have’: *oi/eüs/ot/eümes/eüstes/orent*). The alternations started to disappear in MidF and had been lost by the seventeenth century.

Several changes also affected inflectional endings. The 3P inflections *-et* (present indicative) and *-at* (simple past) of verbs in the first group disappeared at the end of the eleventh century (*aimet* > *aime*, *amat* > *ama*). As for the present indicative, whereas in EOF 1P had zero marking for most verbs, from the twelfth century onwards *-e* appeared for verbs in the first group (*chant* > *chante*), and *-s* for other verbs (*vien* > *viens*, *croi* > *crois*). It is likely that this was influenced by 2P/3P (and probably verbs which already had a supporting *-e* after certain consonants: *entre* ‘enter’, *change* ‘change’) for the first group verbs, and by 2P for other verbs. In the simple past, verbs in *-ir* and *-re*, which had zero marking for 1P, started in OF to take a final *-s* under the influence of verbs which had one in their stem (*dis* ‘said’), a tendency that intensified in the fifteenth century. With respect to the simple past, the inflection *-t*, which had disappeared from 3P of verbs in *-ir* in the eleventh century, was progressively reintroduced and generalized in the fifteenth century (*respondi* > *respondit* ‘answered’). Also in the simple past, the *-smes/-stes* inflections of 4P/5P (*-smes* being an analogical remodelling, in OF, of *-mes* on the model of *-stes*), tended to lose their *-s-*, which was replaced by spellings with the circumflex accent in the eighteenth century (*chantasmes* > *chantâmes* ‘sang’, *fustes* > *fûtes* ‘were’). The imperfect and the conditional originally had etymological inflections in *-ei* and then *-oi* for 1P/2P/3P: *-oie*, *-oies*, *-oi(e)t*, whose pronunciation evolved from OF /oi/ to /wɛ/ or /ɛ/. The second pronunciation, the one which

ultimately prevailed, only became widespread in spelling from the seventeenth century onwards. The *-e* as part of the ending *-oie*, *-oies*, *-oi(e)t*, which disappeared very early from the spellings for 3P, became silent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for 1P/2P, and began to disappear from the spelling from the sixteenth century (although preserved for 6P: *chantaient* ‘were singing’). The replacement of *-e* by *-s* for 1P started in the fifteenth century and was complete in the sixteenth century. Lastly, it should be noted that the dissyllabic inflections *-iiens* and *-iiez* of 4P and 5P started to be reduced in OF, and the form *-ions* replaced *-(i)iens* in the fourteenth century.

Generally, person inflection underwent gradual phonetic erosion, making the pronunciation of 1/2/3/6P indistinguishable most of the time (*chante/chantes/chante/chantent*; *chantais/chantais/chantait/chantaient*). The possible confusion generated by this evolution was compensated by the increase in frequency of the subject personal pronoun from the thirteenth century on and its systematic use from the sixteenth century (see 8.3.2.1).

Finally, we should note the development, from the sixteenth century onwards (with a few attestations in MidF), of new verbal periphrases with a temporal and/or aspectual value (Gougenheim 1929, 1984 [1951]: 135-7; Marchello-Nizia 1997 [1979]: 409-10). In the early days of French there was only one relatively common periphrasis, *aller* + *-ant* as in *il va chantant*, which, after a process of grammaticalization, simply expressed the durative or progressive aspect of the process (‘he is singing’). Among the numerous creations, only a few have survived, likewise resulting from a process of grammaticalization: *je vais chanter* (‘I am going to sing’), which seems to have been grammaticalized as early as in the fifteenth century, and *je viens de chanter* (‘I have just sung’).

The emergence of these periphrases illustrates a continuous trend in the history of French, one which began in Late Latin: the creation, alongside or replacing synthetic verbal forms, of analytic forms (compound past, pluperfect indicative, and past subjunctive), which are very rare in Latin.

### 8.2.3 Invariable categories

#### 8.2.3.1 Adverbs

OF inherited several adverbs from Latin (*mieuz/mieux* < *melius* ‘better’, *fors* < *foris* ‘outside’, *là* < *illac* ‘there’, *hui* < *hodie* ‘today, etc.’). Some of these ended with an etymological *-s*, which was reinterpreted as an adverbial marker and added to certain others (*oncque(s)* < *unquam* ‘never’, *sempres* < *semper* ‘always’, etc.). Other adverbs had: a nominal origin (*enfin*

< *en fin* ‘finally’, *ensuite* < *en suite* ‘then’, *beaucoup* < *beau coup* ‘much’, etc.); a verbal origin (*espoir* < *espoir* ‘I hope’, which disappeared in MidF, *peut-être* < *puet cel estre* ‘maybe’, etc.); a propositional origin (*naguère* < *n’i a guere* ‘recently’ then ‘in remote times’, etc.); or resulted from the combination of several adverbs (*désormais* < *des ores mais* ‘henceforth’). The category of adverbs has been constantly evolving since the beginning of French, especially up to the seventeenth century. This resulted in disappearances (e.g., *atant* ‘then’, *nonporquant* ‘however’, *endementiers* ‘meanwhile’), or changes in meaning (*or(e)(es)* ‘now’ > ‘yet’). Changes also included, especially from MidF onwards, creations, either of adverbs (e.g., *aussitôt* ‘immediately’, *d’abord* ‘first’), sometimes derived from adjectives (e.g., *court* ‘shortly’, *clair* ‘clearly’), or of adverbial phrases (e.g., *de bonne heure* ‘early’, *tout à fait* ‘absolutely’). Suffixation in *-ment* (from the Latin ablative *mente* (*mens/mentis* ‘(state of) mind’) of feminine adjectives has been, from the very beginning of French, a highly productive way of forming adverbs of manner (e.g. *grandement* ‘greatly’, *fortement* ‘strongly’). From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, forms which up to then had been polyfunctional (i.e. both adverb and preposition) started to differentiate (a general tendency in the language, see 8.2.1.3). For example, the prepositional use was lost for *puis* (‘then’) and *dehors* (‘outside’) and became rare for *dedans* (‘inside’) and *dessous* (‘below’).

### 8.2.3.2 Prepositions

Latin used few prepositions. The simplification of the case system from six to two cases between Latin and French, then its disappearance in MidF, led, on the one hand, to a specialization in the syntactic uses of the most frequent prepositions (*à, de, en, par*, from Latin), which to a large extent lost their spatial dimension,<sup>13</sup> and on the other hand, to the creation of numerous lexical prepositions and prepositional phrases (Fagard 2010, 2020). The creation of new lexical prepositions has been—and still is—a constant feature of French (Fagard and De Mulder 2007). Besides prepositions that had existed since OF (*avant* ‘before’, *pour* ‘for’, *entre* ‘between’, *jusque* ‘until’, *avec* ‘with’, *depuis* ‘since’, etc.), new prepositions emerged in MidF from various categories (verb: *durant* ‘during’; noun: *malgré* ‘despite’ < *mal + gré*; adjective: *sauf* ‘except’), while others disappeared (e.g. *delez* ‘beside’, *enmi* ‘in

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<sup>13</sup> The partial replacement of *en* by *dans* is a notable change, which did not occur in the other Romance languages. From the sixteenth century onwards, *en* started to lose ground and was progressively restricted, mostly, to the introduction of a gerundive form or a noun group with no determiner: *en attendant/en réalité/en France*. In parallel, the frequency of *dans* (*dens, danz, ...*), first attested in the twelfth century, while remaining rare, began to increase, especially in noun groups introduced by a definite determiner (*dans la maison* ‘in the house’, *dans chaque école* ‘in each school’ (Fagard and Combettes 2013).

the middle of’). From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, forms that had been polyfunctional (preposition and adverb) until then began to differentiate (see 8.2.2.1). This creativity has continued in ModF with the development of prepositional uses of nouns, such as *côté*, *genre* (see Fagard and De Mulder 2007): ‘Côté bricolage, il n’est pas très calé’ (‘As regards DIY, he’s not very good’). Along with the grammaticalization of some functional prepositions and the creation of new lexical prepositions, French also created, in OF, reinforced prepositions ((*par*) *devers* ‘in the direction of’, *fors de* ‘outside of’, etc.)—several of which subsequently disappeared—and, from MidF onwards, a large number of prepositional phrases (e.g. *au regard de* ‘as regards’, *au-delà de* ‘beyond’). This trend intensified from the second half of the sixteenth century with new creations and a greater use of existing ones (*à cause de* ‘because of’, *au lieu de* ‘instead of’, *le long de* ‘along’, *à partir de* ‘from’, etc.). In ModF, new prepositions such as *sur* (‘on’) undergo grammaticalization and concomitant erosion of their primitive spatial meaning (e.g. *Je compte sur lui*, ‘I rely on him’; *Il travaille sur Paris* ‘he works in Paris’), and there are several hundred prepositional phrases that are more or less fixed: *Son histoire est au-delà (même) de l’imaginable* (‘his story is beyond what can be imagined’).

### 8.2.3.3 Subordinating conjunctions

OF inherited only a few conjunctions from Latin: *que*, *quant/quand* (< *quando*), *si* (< *si*) et *come* (*com*, etc.) < *quomodo*, the last three expressing temporal, hypothetical, and manner relations respectively. *Que*, which inherited the uses of *quod* and *quam*, had a wide range of uses and values in OF, which explains the development, very early on, of many complex conjunctions whose role was to make the semantic relation explicit (Combettes 2020a). The list of conjunctions was later enriched by two other forms, *puisque* (‘since’) and *lorsque* (‘when’), resulting from the grammaticalization of expressions (*puis que* and *lors que*). While the two parts merged completely in these two cases, many others merged only partially (*malgré que* ‘although’ < *malgré que*, *parce que* ‘because’ < *par ce que*). In OF, many complex expressions developed, built on: a preposition (e.g. *pour que* ‘in order to’, *dès que* ‘as soon as’), an adverb (*lors que*, *bien que*), a participle (*pendant que* ‘during’, *vu que* ‘because’), or a prepositional group (*à condition que* ‘provided that’, *au moment où* ‘at the time of’) to which the conjunction *que*, or sometimes the relative pronoun *où*, was most often added. From OF to the seventeenth century, there were constant creations and disappearances, often linked to the disappearance of the base: *endementiers que* (‘whereas’) died out in the

wake of *endementiers* ('meanwhile'), while *tandis que* ('whereas')—despite the disappearance of the adverb *tandis*—remained as an exception. They took place in all semantic domains: time (*pendant que* 'while', *à présent que* 'now that'); cause (*sans que* 'without that', *du fait que* 'because'); purpose and concession (*si bien que* 'so that', *de sorte que* 'so that'); hypothesis (*à condition que* 'provided that', *à supposer que* 'supposing that'); and concession, exception (*comment que* 'although', *sauf que* 'except that'). In the following centuries, comparatively few changes occurred (despite a few creations involving participles in the seventeenth century such as *excepté que* 'except that', and more recently *en admettant que* 'assuming that'). Finally, two points should be emphasized: first, the existence in OF of cases of tmesis,<sup>14</sup> in particular for temporal complex expressions (*ainz/lors... que...*), and second, the competition between *ce que* and *que* in several expressions (*avant que/avant ce que*), which disappeared progressively between the fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries, with *que* being favoured in expressions introducing circumstantial subordinate clauses (*pendant que, depuis que*) while *ce que* was restricted to expressions introducing clausal complements (*de ce que, à ce que : je m'attends à ce qu'il vienne* 'I expect him to come') (Combettes 2007, 2020a: 900-5).

### 8.3 Syntax

The syntax of French has undergone radical changes since Latin, some of which affect the internal structure of noun and verb groups, and others the clause. To sum them up in a very concise—and necessarily simplistic—way, it can be said that they are characterized by a growing contiguity and dependence between elements (resulting in a more tightly structured and hierarchical organization) and by a more rigid word order, these changes being correlated, to a certain extent, with the loss of nominal and verbal inflections. Many of them started as early as EOF and OF (ninth-thirteenth centuries) and most of them were completed by the seventeenth century, even though there still remained a few 'old structures' at that time. There is insufficient space to give an exhaustive account here of these changes: only the most important ones will be addressed in the following sections.

#### 8.3.1 Noun and verb groups

##### 8.3.1.1 Noun groups (NG) and pronoun groups

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<sup>14</sup> Insertion of one or several word(s) between two elements generally linked in a single word; for examples, see 8.3.3.5.

The structure and cohesion of the NG were much stronger in OF than in Latin and became even more so in MidF. When expressed, the determiner preceded the noun in the earliest texts. From the eleventh century onwards, the adjective could no longer be separated from the noun, but its position varied until the fifteenth century; from then on it was mostly in postnominal position, with a few exceptions, among which some evaluative adjectives, as is still the case in ModF, with possible semantic variations (*un grand homme* ‘a great man’/*un homme grand* ‘a tall man’) (see Chapter 2, this volume). After the twelfth century, it was no longer possible to separate the noun complement from the noun or to place it in prenominal position (*la roi cort* ‘the court of the king vs. *La fille le roi* ‘the daughter of the king’). The direct construction, which was subject to certain constraints (Carlier and Marchello-Nizia 2020: 998), disappeared in the fourteenth century due to competition from the prepositional construction with *a/de* that had been attested since the thirteenth century. It now subsists only in place or event names (e.g. *rue Jules Ferry*, *Fête-Dieu*). Note that the relative clause, which has always followed its antecedent, long retained the possibility of being separated from the latter: ‘si s’en vet en la chambre ou mes sires Gauvains et Lancelot estoient, qui avoient geu ensemble la nuit’ (‘then he went to the room where Gawain and Lancelot were, who had both laid there during the night’) (*Graal*, c. 1225, p. 164d).<sup>15</sup> The generalization of ‘modifier + N’ to ‘N + modifier’ can be related to the disappearance of the last remaining vestiges of Object-Verb (OV) word order in MidF.

The absence of a determiner was more frequent in OF than in ModF, occurring with a noun denoting a single, generic element or an indefinite group, either plural, mass, or abstract: ‘Esperuns d’or ad en ses piez fermez’ (‘He tied golden spurs to his feet’) (*Roland*, c. 1100, v. 344). Indeed, it was often present in the earliest texts. In *Alexis* (c. 1050), 70% of NGs have a determiner, a frequency that rises to 87% when the NG is the subject (Carlier and Marchello-Nizia 2020: 972). With a subject, modern usage was already established by the sixteenth century, but occurred a little later for objects. The absence of an article has been preserved in ModF with proper nouns, in verb phrases, in the absence of reference (e.g. as an attribute: *il est médecin* ‘he is a doctor’), in lists, and, for certain nouns, following a preposition (*avec colère* ‘with anger’) (see Chapter 2, this volume).

The range of determiners has been progressively enriched over the centuries; here, we will mention only a few. The first to make its appearance, in the thirteenth century, was *ledit* (modelled on the Latin *supradictus*). Heavily used in MidF, its use declined from the

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<sup>15</sup> This separation is still attested in ModF, although in a somewhat archaic register: *un homme a appelé, qui voulait parler à Paul* (‘a man called, who wanted to talk to Paul’).



sixteenth century on, and it is now restricted to legal language (Mortelmans 2006, 2008). The indefinite article *un*, which had been used from the beginning of French, albeit seldomly, and particularly with a subject NG, is also attested in a plural form from the mid-twelfth century, *un(s)/unes*, to designate an entity composed of several elements, e.g. *uns degrez* ('stairs'). This form declined in the fifteenth century and had become archaic by the sixteenth century. The most remarkable innovation is probably that of the partitive article, which is a case of the recategorization of a preposition as a determiner (Carlier and Marchello-Nizia 2020). There are some hints of this development in EOF in certain partitive uses of 'de + determiner', but the partitive article *stricto sensu* is only sporadically attested in OF ('un baceler qui du pain li gaaignera', 'a bachelor who will earn her living for her out of honour', *Aucassin*, late-twelfth century, p. 2). It only really progressed from the end of the fourteenth century, initially with concrete nouns. From then on, *de* was no longer a preposition in this context and the notion of partition of an identifiable whole disappeared, both in the singular (*du, de la*) and the plural (*des*). By the end of MidF, the quasi-systematic use of a determiner at the head of the NG had become an established fact. Henceforth, it was the determiner that ensured the marking of grammatical features that were no longer distributed over the various elements of the NG due to the erosion of inflectional endings, and it became an essential factor in the cohesion and structure of the NG.

The pronoun group also underwent changes. In OF, subject personal pronouns could be stressed and had syntactic autonomy, two features that they started to lose in the thirteenth century, a trend that gathered momentum in MidF. These features allowed them to be separated from the verb (in preverbal position). The pronoun could thus be coordinated with another pronoun or a noun phrase (1), or determined by different elements, in particular by a relative clause (2):

(1) **E il e lur lignage** erent desherité (Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, *Vie de saint Thomas Becket*, late-twelfth century, v. 1365<sup>16</sup>)

'and they and their descendants will be disinherited'

(2) Et ce est **il** qui me requiert (Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, late-twelfth century, v. 2129)

'and this is he who proposes to me'

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<sup>16</sup> Details of the texts cited in the examples and their shortened titles can be found in the Appendix at the end of this chapter.

From the thirteenth century on, the pronoun began to be replaced in these uses by the stressed oblique forms (*lui, moi, etc.*), but this progression was very uneven depending on the construction. In coordinated structures, for instance, ‘modern’ forms are encountered very early on:

- (3) **Moi et vos** fumez en une hore engendré (*Ami et Amile*, c. 1200, v. 1041)  
‘I and you were fathered at the same time’

The two forms coexisted until the fifteenth century (and even, sporadically, until the end of the sixteenth century for pronouns determined by a relative clause). The possibility for the subject form to be modified now remains only in the set phrase ‘je, soussignée Paula Durant, certifie que ...’ (‘I, the undersigned, Paula Durant, certify that ...’).

### 8.3.1.2 Verb group

The evolution of the verb group (VG) is characterized, like that of the NG, by increased fixing of the ordering and contiguity of its elements. From OF on, the unstressed oblique pronoun (*me, te, le, etc.*) (see 8.2.12), was placed immediately before the conjugated verb, unlike the nominal object whose position was variable (see 8.3.2.1). However, since the sentence-initial position had to be occupied by a stressed element (Thurneysen 1892) if no other element preceded the verb, either the stressed form of the pronoun was used (*moi, toi, lui, etc.*) (4), or the pronoun followed the verb (5). This constraint started to weaken at the beginning of the thirteenth century, after which the unstressed form was used before the verb (6), even though there was variation for some time. Note that the pronoun still appears after the verb in imperative constructions.

- (4) **Moi poise** mout (vs Mout **me poise**) (*Erec et Enide*, c. 1170, v. 4157, v. 512)  
‘it pains me much’
- (5) Brengain a par les braz saisie, / **Acole la**, Deu en mercie (Beroul, *Tristan*, late-twelfth century, ll 531-2)  
‘Brengain [he] has seized by her arms, hugs her, thanks God’
- (6) Le me creantez vos, fet ele, come loiaux chevaliers? (*Graal*, c. 1225, p. 181c)  
‘Do you promise it to me, she said, on your honour as a knight?’

In ModF, when the verb is accompanied by two pronouns (direct and indirect object), their respective order depends on person: *il me le donnelje le lui donne*.<sup>17</sup> In OF, the order was, conversely, always direct object-indirect object, whatever the person:

(7) Biaus sire, Amors **le me** fist faire (*Eracle*, late-twelfth century, v. 4922)

Sire, Love - it - me - made do ('Love made me do it')

The order of indirect and direct objects started to reverse at the beginning of the fifteenth century (Skårup 1975: 109-25), but only with 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person indirect objects (*le me > me le*), the change being completed by the mid-seventeenth century. The order has on the other hand remained unchanged with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person indirect object, or, whatever the person, after an imperative form (*donne-le moi*). Concomitantly, between the late-fifteenth and the-late sixteenth centuries the order *en y* evolved into *y en*. These changes (as well as the conservation of *le lui*) so far remain unexplained.<sup>18</sup>

In OF, when an object pronoun was governed by an infinitive that was itself governed by a verb, the pronoun was placed before the conjugated verb, whatever its function with respect to the infinitive, either subject (8) or object (9) (unless the verb was in initial position, see above). This phenomenon is referred to as clitic climbing.

(8) Li rois **le voit venir** grant erre (Beroul, *Tristan*, v. 1870)

'The king sees him coming quickly'

(9) et ce est une chose par quoi il **le doit mout amer** (*Graal*, p. 166d)

'And this is one thing whereby he must value it very much'

From 1400, we begin to find the pronoun before the infinitive, and in this case sometimes in the stressed form if it is the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person or the reflexive pronoun ('car le Roy veult **soy** acquitter envers tous', Jean de Bueil, *Le Jouvencel*, 1461, p. 28 'because the king wants to get even with everybody') but only if it is the object of the infinitive. If the pronoun is the subject

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<sup>17</sup> The rule may be summed up as follows: indirect object (1P, 2P,4P, 5P)-direct object (3P, 6P), versus direct object (3P, 6P)-indirect object (3P, 6P) (Blanche-Benveniste et al. 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Several linguists have attempted an explanation, notably De Kok (1985: 138-44), who, however, fails to explain why *lui le* was preserved.

of the infinitive, it remains in front of the conjugated verb, as in constructions with a factive verb or a perception verb (*je le vois venir* ‘I see him coming’). The old construction nevertheless remained dominant throughout the fifteenth century (probably even until the mid-seventeenth century), but then started to lose ground, while remaining attested until the eighteenth century (and even beyond, sporadically, as an archaism).

The evolution of the VG is also characterized by greater contiguity between the finite and non-finite forms of the verb (infinitive or past participle), which is reflected in the decline of the insertion of the subject, object, or attribute between the two verbal elements, a shift that is also related to the fixing of the arguments on either side of the verb (see 8.3.2.1). The possibility of inserting the subject remained until the mid-sixteenth century (see 8.3.2.1), while the insertion of the object, which was still frequent in the sixteenth century, is only attested in poetry in the seventeenth century:

(10) La femme ne **veut plus son mary reconnoistre** (Ronsard, *Misères*, 1563, p. 9)

The wife does not want anymore her husband to recognize (‘the wife no longer wants to recognize her husband’)

Lastly, it should be mentioned that over the centuries, the construction of many verbs changed: some acquired (*régenter* ‘govern’ > *régenter qqchose*) or lost (*soupirer* ‘sigh’ *qqchose* > *soupirer*) the property of transitivity, and others shifted from direct to indirect transitivity (*approcher* ‘approach’ *qqchose* > *approcher de qqchose*) or vice versa (*secourir* ‘rescue’ *à qq* > *secourir qq*) (Fournier 1998: 54-64; Combettes 2020b).

## 8.3.2 Clauses and sentences

### 8.3.2.1 Word order and expression of the major constituents in the clause

ModF is a fairly strict Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) language (at least in declarative clauses), in which the expression of the subject is almost obligatory, and the verb may be preceded by several adverbial elements in addition to the subject (see Chapter 2, this volume). These characteristics sharply distinguish ModF from OF. In this section, I will consider in turn the change in French from a partial null subject to an obligation subject language; the loss of the ‘verb-second’ constraint; and the evolution from a flexible to a rigid word order.

### ***From a partial null subject language to an obligatory subject language***

In ModF, the expression of the subject is mandatory, except, mainly, in the case of imperatives and in contexts of close coordination or juxtaposition between verbs. This characteristic sets French apart from most other Romance languages, and also from EOF, which inherited from Latin the possibility of not expressing the subject when its referent could be unambiguously identified. As a result, until the end of the twelfth century, null subjects were very frequent, and they even prevailed in main declaratives.

A first major turning point took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century: subject expression rose from 47% in *Passion* (c. 1000) to 79% three centuries later (*Graal*, c. 1225) (Prévost and Marchello-Nizia (2020: 1063). This increase was in favour of pronominal subjects (personal pronouns).<sup>19</sup> A second change took place in the mid-sixteenth century: from then on, subjects were overwhelmingly present, with frequencies rising up to those found in ModF (over 90%), though some constructions remained until the end of the seventeenth century that are no longer acceptable. Rather than considering OF a null-subject language (NSL), some scholars view it as a partial null subject language (Kaiser 2009; Zimmermann 2009); first, overt subjects prevailed in subordinate clauses from the very beginning of French (see below) and second, none of the supposed features of an NSL are observed: we find referential pronouns even in non-emphatic contexts and in the absence of any ambiguity, and expletive pronouns even in the earliest texts (ninth-eleventh centuries), albeit very rarely.

As is often the case for changes, the increase in overt subjects was not homogeneous. Especially during the first period (until the thirteenth century), we observe discrepancies in frequencies, partly influenced by ‘external’ factors such as form and domain: texts in prose on the one hand, and non-literary texts on the other were pioneers (though it is not easy to disentangle the two criteria as most non-literary texts were written in prose). Several ‘internal’ (linguistic) factors also played a major role. First, as has long been observed (Franzén 1939; Adams 1987; Prévost and Marchello-Nizia 2020), from the earliest texts on until the sixteenth century, overt subjects were much more frequent in subordinate clauses than in main declaratives. The difference reached its peak in the thirteenth century: the frequencies in subordinate clauses rose to nearly 90% in almost all texts whereas they did not exceed 65% in

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<sup>19</sup> This is unsurprising if one considers the proximity of null subjects and personal pronouns on accessibility hierarchies (Ariel 1988), both of them signalling a high degree of cognitive activation.

main declaratives. One explanation of the main-subordinate asymmetry involves the assumed resistance of subordinate clauses to verb second (V2) syntax.<sup>20</sup>

Second, subjects were much more often expressed in the absence of another argument, especially the direct object. This gap, which was striking in the oldest texts (Rouquier and Marchello-Nizia 2013), decreased sharply from the beginning of the thirteenth century, especially in prose.

Third, the data show a different progression of overt subjects depending on verb person and the direct speech/narrative opposition, the two criteria being partially correlated (Prévost 2018). Especially from the beginning of the thirteenth until the late fifteenth century, the rate of overt 3/6P (and expletive) pronouns was the lowest of all whereas the rate of overt 1P pronouns was the highest. This skewing in the distribution of overt 1P and 3/6P pronouns, however, also resulted from the fact that 1P pronouns are mostly used in direct speech: generally speaking, overt expression was more frequent in direct speech. This is no surprise if one considers that direct speech is a sort of (pale) mirror of spoken language, supposedly more advanced in evolution (though direct speech has not always been a pioneering context; see below section ‘From flexible to rigid word order’): the fact that 1P pronouns refer to the speaker (a privileged place for expressiveness or emphasis, which find fertile ground in direct speech) may have played a major role. Note, however, that both factors operated only in main clause declaratives, not in subordinate clauses, which may be related to the fact that overt subjects were practically generalized in subordinate clauses from a very early date.

Finally, a close examination of the data reveals that null subjects first lost ground in non-coordinated structures, then in coordinated or juxtaposed structures with different subjects and/or with different temporal orientations. We still find a few examples in the late-sixteenth century but none half a century later:

(11) *Cependant il s'en voit quelques uns en France, et croy que c'est de ceste beste dequoy Marot ... fait mention ...* (Léry, *Bresil*, 1578, p. 213)

‘However, a few may be seen in France, and [I] believe that this is this animal that Marot mentions’

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<sup>20</sup> This is linked to claim that there is a correlation between null subjects and V2, especially in the generative framework: Adams 1987; Vance 1997.

The reasons why null subjects were progressively lost in French have long been a subject of debate. The traditional explanation (Foulet 1930) relates the rise of obligatory subjects to the morphological erosion of inflectional endings expressing subject-verb agreement. However, this explanation has been called into question, because of an apparent time lag between the two changes (although assumptions about the chronological ordering of the relevant changes may differ in non-trivial ways; Prévost 2018; Simonenko et al. 2019). The loss of rich verbal morphology was probably not the only, or even the most influential, factor. Rather, it facilitated the breakthrough of a development which had already been set in motion (see below section ‘From flexible to rigid word order’). The verb-second constraint (next section) has also been put forth as an explanation (see Foulet (1930); Skårup (1975); Vance (1997)). It rests on the claim that null subjects are actually postverbal pronominal subjects (‘inverted’ because another element occupies the preverbal position) which have been omitted. As a result, the decline of V2 entailed the decrease of null subjects (Adams 1987).<sup>21</sup> A third, pragmatic, explanation relates the increase in overt personal pronouns to a need for expressiveness (or emphasis). This hypothesis was put forward early (Foulet 1930; Moignet 1973) and taken up and further developed by Detges (2003). The increasing use of pronominal subjects for the sake of expressiveness allegedly brought about some sort of rhetorical devaluation, which in turn led to a more widespread—and thus pragmatically less marked—use of overt pronouns. To summarize, the most likely explanation is that phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic factors jointly contributed to the increase in overt personal pronouns.

### ***The loss of the “verb-second” constraint***

As was noted early on (Thurneysen 1892), in OF (especially from the twelfth century on), in most declaratives the verb was necessarily preceded by a stressed element; neither the category (nominal phrase, pronoun, adverb, etc.) of this element nor its function (subject, nominal object, adverbial, etc.) was constrained, much as in Modern German. Owing to this constraint, OF has been labelled a ‘verb-second’ (V2) language, be it in a merely descriptive sense or in a more theoretical one (implying in that case a set of related properties, especially in the generative framework; Vance 1997) and more specifically as an asymmetric V2 language, since embedded clauses were not subjected to it. However, although V2 was a strong tendency, it was not a strict rule, and many texts display some occurrences of verbs in

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<sup>21</sup> However, this explanation may be challenged if one admits that the V2 constraint was not a strict rule in OF.

1<sup>st</sup> (12) or 3<sup>rd</sup> position (13) (or even, though exceptionally, in a still more remote position in the clause). The existence of such data resulted in a debate as to whether OF is a loose or a strict V2 language.<sup>22</sup>

(12) Ne **volt** li emfes sum pedre corocier (*Alexis*, c. 1050, v. 54)

Did not want - the child - his father - to anger ('the child did not want to anger his father')

(13) Li quens Rollant Gualter de l'Hum **apelet** (*Roland*, c. 1100, v. 803)

Count Roland - Gualter de l'Hum - calls ('Count Roland calls Gualter de l'Hum')

Whatever its nature and function, the initial element was often connective, or was the sentence topic (typically the subject). However, since the initial position is strategic, it is unsurprising that we also find focal or contrastive elements which receive some emphasis in this position (especially the nominal object, whose preverbal position became rare from the twelfth century (see next section: 'From a flexible to a rigid word order'), but also adjectival attributes and quantifiers such as *molt*). The fourteenth century appears to be a turning-point as regards the (loose) V2 constraint: from then on, increasing occurrences of verbs preceded by more than one element are attested, especially the subject and (an)other element(s). Verbs in initial position had started to decrease in the twelfth century, their range progressively narrowing from initially intransitive verbs to verbs exclusively denoting existence, appearance, and disappearance, as well as to some transitive verbs with a heavy subject ('Devront repasser l'examen tous ceux qui...', 'Will have to take an exam all those who...').<sup>23</sup> An example such as this one is quite exceptional in the late sixteenth century: 'Dura ce carnage jusques à la derniere goutte de sang qui se trouva' ('Lasted this carnage until the last drop of blood that was found') (Montaigne, *Essais*, 1592).

### ***From a flexible to a rigid word order***

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<sup>22</sup> For different stances, see, among others, Kaiser and Zimmerman (2011); Danckaert and Prévost (forthcoming) on the one side, and Wolfe (2018, 2020) on the other. For detailed frequencies of the position of verbs, see Marchello-Nizia 2020c.

<sup>23</sup> Such constructions may be accounted for by informational considerations, the subject being focussed (Lahousse 2011).



OF was characterized by its flexible word order (as regards the grammatical functions), allowing for preverbal objects, postverbal subjects, and for all six permutations of S(ubject), V(erb), and O(bject). The evolution towards an SVO order spanned several centuries.

The earliest change concerns nominal objects (the preverbal position of pronominal objects, inherited from Latin, was settled at the very beginning of French, with a few exceptions; Marchello-Nizia 2020e; 8.2.2). In EOF nominal objects were mostly preverbal, as was the case in Latin. But a century later OV order had fallen to 35% (*Roland*, c. 1100):

(14) *Vostre message fesime a Charlun* (*Roland*, v. 418)

‘Your message [we] transmitted to Charles’

It then fell to less than 10% in *Graal*, and to only 5 % in the early fifteenth century, with a faster growth of postverbal objects in prose (versus verse) and in subordinate clauses, at least until the thirteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Some mid-fifteenth century texts no longer display any occurrences of OV. In ModF nominal objects can occupy a preverbal position only in OSV constructions (see below).

The position of the subject in ModF is more flexible than that of the object, at least in main declaratives and in subordinate clauses (subjects have been mostly in postverbal position in interrogative and parenthetical clauses from the earliest texts, and they have progressively settled in preverbal position in exclamatory and injunctive (subjunctive) clauses). However, postverbal subjects have receded considerably since OF, along paths which differ according to their nature, nominal or pronominal (personal pronouns).<sup>25</sup> Note that neither prose nor direct speech seem to have been influential factors, whereas there are some disparities between main declaratives and subordinate clauses (Prévost and Marchello-Nizia 2020: 1082).

Postverbal nominal subjects did not decrease in a linear fashion: their frequency in declaratives was as high in some late fifteenth century texts as in some early thirteenth century texts (more than 50% in Commynes’s *Mémoires* and *Graal*). The mid-sixteenth century marks a turning point: preverbal subject rates have since then always been over 80%. It also marks an endpoint as concerns the variation between two structures which had been in competition for several centuries: ‘Germanic’ inversion (see De Bakker 1997), where the subject was placed between the finite and the non-finite verb (a) and ‘Romance’ inversion,

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<sup>24</sup> The frequencies come from Marchello-Nizia (2020e: 1127-8).

<sup>25</sup> Other pronouns have always behaved more or less like nominal subjects, with the notable exception of indefinite *on*, which was assimilated to personal pronouns from the seventeenth century on.

where the subject was placed after both the finite and non-finite forms (b). Romance inversion won out by the mid-sixteenth century:

(15) *Atant s'en est Iseut tornee* (Beroul, *Tristan*, late-twelfth century, v. 233)

‘Then has Isolde left’

(16) *Mot m'a pené son mariage* (*id.*, v. 126)

‘Much has grieved me her wedding’

The decrease in postverbal nominal subjects was accompanied by progressive restrictions on verbs: in the thirteenth century, intransitive and attributive verbs became increasingly frequent, to the detriment of transitive verbs. The third major change relates to the elements preceding the verb. While they were nearly unconstrained until the thirteenth century, be it from a formal or functional point of view, the possible range then progressively decreased. Arguments started to lose ground early on, and the range of adverbial elements narrowed sharply during the seventeenth century, leaving just spatial and temporal adverbs. From then on it was no longer possible for argumentative or epistemic adverbs to be followed by ‘Verb-Nominal subject’ structures, henceforth replaced by ‘complex inversion’ (see 8.3.3.2): *peut-être Paul viendra-t-il* (‘maybe Paul will he come’). The modern system was in place at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The postposition of nominal subjects is still well attested in ModF, but it is restricted by the verb semantics and/or the weight of the subject, and/or the presence of a locative element. In subordinate clauses, the evolution took an unexpected direction. While postverbal subjects decreased sharply from the thirteenth century on (rates falling to 2-15% in most texts), they started rising, quite surprisingly, in some adverbial clauses (cause, concession, condition, opposition, and purpose) in the late eighteenth century: ‘Pour que **subsiste notre bonheur**, il ne faut pas que ...’ (‘So that our happiness persists, we must ...’) (Alain-Fournier and Rivière, *Correspondance*, early-twentieth century, p. 43). This resulted in a reversal of the frequencies, with postverbal nominal subjects being henceforth more frequent in subordinate clauses (15%-30%) than in main declaratives (less than 5%).

The evolution of pronominal subjects (personal pronouns) is quite different. As they already largely prevailed at the very beginning of French, preverbal pronominal subjects did not undergo any very significant progression over the centuries. From more than 80 % in most texts, they reached more than 90% by the early fourteenth century. It should be noted that postposition has always been very marginal in subordinate clauses (between 0% and 5%). The

beginning of the fourteenth century marked a turning point as regards two changes: first, preverbal personal pronouns started to lose their syntactic autonomy (see 8.3.1), and second, contexts allowing for postverbal pronouns began to narrow, especially as regards initial elements. These were highly diversified in OF, even if they often had a connective function or a contrastive effect:

(17) Sire, fet Lancelot, qui fu cil qui tant a parlé a vos? Son cors **ne poi je** veoir, mes sa parole **oï je** (*Graal*, p. 189a)

‘Sire, says Lancelot, who was the one who talked to you? His body could I not see, but his word could I hear very well’

Logical or pragmatic elements formed a growing proportion from the fourteenth century onwards, and from the end of the seventeenth century only adverbs with an epistemic value (*peut-être* ‘maybe’, *à peine* ‘hardly’, etc.) were allowed, as is still the case in ModF. It should be mentioned that parenthetical clauses (e.g. *dit-il*, ‘he said’) have always been characterized by the postposition of pronominal subjects (Guillot et al. 2014; Marchello-Nizia 2020f: 1143-5), even though we also find preverbal pronominal subjects in colloquial ModF (*j’ai pas d’avis*, (*qu’il me dit* ‘I have no opinion, he says to me’).

The decline of preverbal nominal objects (and their growing contiguity to the verb), of postverbal subjects, as well as an increasing tendency to position subject and nominal object on either side of the verb led to a gradual reduction of the six orders OSV, OVS, SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS) attested in OF, in favour of SVO.

In EOF, for which the available data are scarce, SOV was the most common order, followed by SVO, and, more rarely, OVS, VSO and OSV:

(18) La domnizelle celle kose non contredist (*Eulalie*, 881, v. 23)

The young girl – this thing – did not contradict (‘the young girl did not contradict this thing’)

This order drastically decreased in the early eleventh century (to less than 10%), and disappeared in MidF, though it remained for longer in subordinate clauses:

(19) mais Jehan Richard, **qui ceste mauvaitié avoit faicte**, luy aidast (Vigneulles, *Nouvelles*, 1515, p. 131)

‘But Jehan Richard, who this bad action had done, helped him’

As a result, by the early eleventh century SVO was already dominant in all texts (between 60% and 80%, with very few exceptions), both in main declaratives and in subordinate clauses (with still higher rates in the latter). The following lines briefly explain how the OSV, OVS, VSO, and VOS orders progressively declined. Note that this notation does not exclude the presence of other elements (X), which, owing to the lack of space, are not taken into account here (Marchello-Nizia 2020d).

In OF, both the VOS (20) and OSV (21) schemas were already rare (5-8%), and most often attested with a nominal subject:

(20) Ja n’en **avrunt reproece mi parent** (*Roland*, v. 1076)

Never - about it - will have - reproach - my parents (‘Never will my parents be blamed for it’)

(21) **Mot grant miracle Deus** i out (Beroul, *Tristan*, late twelfth, v. 756)

A great miracle - God - there - achieved (‘God achieved a great miracle there’)

On the contrary the OVS order (22) was not rare (at least in main declaratives, more often with a nominal subject), and ranked second in frequency until the twelfth century (though lagging far behind SVO). It then started to recede:

(22) **Granz miracles** vos a fait Dex (Beroul, *Tristan*, v. 377)

Great miracles - for you - has done - God (‘God has done great miracles for you’)

Infrequent until the mid-twelfth century (5-10%), VSO then started to increase (10-30% in main declaratives), and exceeded OVS in frequency:

(23) Des lors **te toli li anemis la veue** (*Graal*, p. 160a)

Henceforth - from you - stole - the enemy - the sight ('Henceforth the enemy stole the sight from you')

The OF trends became more pronounced in MidF, with a noticeable exception: OSV order, which was previously very rare, started to increase at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and was attested in most texts until the late fifteenth century, most often in declarative clauses, with a pronominal subject:

(24) **Nulle chose du monde**                      **il**    **ne lesserent**    en l'ost des Sarrazins

(Joinville, *Mémoires*, c. 1305, p. 122)

Not a single thing of the world - they - left - to the army of the Saracens

It may be the case that this order was retained in spoken language, with a growing emphasis on the object, as the occurrences of OSV in ModF suggests, with a focalized object (Blanche-Benveniste 1996; Abeillé et al. 2008).

VOS remained infrequent in MidF and had seemingly disappeared by the seventeenth century. However, this schema has experienced a sort of revival since the nineteenth century in administrative and legal writing, but only with heavy focal subjects (*Devront payer une amende tous ceux qui ...* 'will have to pay a fine all those who...'). Though it had been receding since the thirteenth century, OVS order still remained well attested until the late fifteenth century, especially with a nominal subject. It disappeared in the seventeenth century. VSO was attested throughout the centuries, but it was doubly restricted: since the sixteenth century, only pronominal subjects have been allowed and the range of preverbal elements has progressively decreased, reduced to epistemic adverbs, such as *peut-être* as noted above.

In conclusion, over the centuries two of the six schemas which were attested in OF when both the subject and the object were expressed (i.e. SOV and OVS) disappeared. OSV is used in Modern spoken French to emphasize the object whereas VOS is constrained by the nature of the subject. VSO has been continuously attested, along with SVO, but it has also become more constrained than it was in Medieval French.

The possible combinations of subject, verb, and attribute have also decreased over the centuries, but 'Attribute-Verb-Subject' (e.g. 'Rares sont les enfants qui aiment les légumes', 'Rare are the children who like vegetables') has remained possible, though restricted as regards the nature of the attribute and/or the subject (Prévost 2020b; Lauwers and Vajnovszki

2021).

The relative freedom of word order in OF has long been accounted for in various theoretical frameworks (e.g. Foulet 1930; Skårup 1975; Vance 1997) by the existence of the case system, inherited from Latin, which made it possible to distinguish the main functions, as well as by the V2 constraint, resulting in the postverbal positioning of the subject when the preverbal position was occupied by another element. The disappearance of the case system is thought to have led to the fixing of word order, especially of the subject in preverbal position, henceforth compatible with the presence of another preverbal element, due to the loss of the V2 constraint. Although none of these factors should be dismissed, they may not be sufficient to fully account for the variation in word order in Medieval French. First, the V2 constraint as an absolute rule is not universally accepted; second, even in a stage in which the erosion of the case system was already advanced, there was still flexible word order, and third, as highlighted by Schøsler (1984, 2013), the case system was only one factor among several that enabled subjects and objects to be distinguished from Latin onwards. As a result, neither the decline of the case system nor the loss of the V2 constraint can account with certainty, by themselves, for the fixing of word order. This strictly morphosyntactic approach was supplemented by an informational principle, which claims that as the subject was a privileged topic or theme (especially the personal pronoun), it often appeared in preverbal position, and this position was therefore reinterpreted as the position of the subject. French, it is argued, went from informational word order to grammatical word order, that is, based on the ordering of the syntactic functions (Vennemann 1974; Combettes 1988).<sup>26</sup> However, to posit a strict opposition between an informational word order in Medieval French and a grammatical one in ModF would certainly be an oversimplification. Syntactic factors played a significant role in Medieval French just as informational ones play an important part in ModF, a stage in which the variable positioning of the subject (and less so, of the object) remains to a certain extent motivated by information structural factors.

### **8.3.2.2 Interrogation**

The ModF interrogative system displays impressive variation, with a range of highly diversified forms (see Chapter 2, this volume), which was not the case in the earliest stages of

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<sup>26</sup> For an approach in a generative framework relating the loss of V2 and Information structure, see Steiner (2014).

French. What follows will focus on direct interrogative clauses and leave aside indirect interrogatives (embedded clauses) (see Glikman 2020).

Throughout the Medieval period, subject-verb inversion (when the subject was expressed), that is ‘simple’ inversion, was the default means of formulating a question, be it a *yes/no* question (25) or a *wh*-question (26), and whatever the nature of the subject. Simple inversion was still common practice in the sixteenth century (27):

(25) Comant? **Vialt** donc **Yvains** ocirre / Monseignor Gauvain, son ami? (Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, late-twelfth century, v. 6062-3)

‘Does Yvain want to kill Sire Gauvain, his friend?’

(26) Dex! **porquoi est li rois** si fol? (Beroul, *Tristan*, late-twelfth century, v. 127)

‘God! Why is the king so mad?’

(27) quand **fut entamée telle besoigne**? (Montaigne, *Essais*, 1592, p. 224)

‘When was started such a work?’

However, in the early seventeenth century simple inversion with a nominal subject in *yes/no* questions was no longer attested and it was replaced by ‘complex’ inversion (‘nominal subject-verb-personal pronoun’): *Paul est-il venu?* (‘Paul did he come?’) (or *est-ce que*, see below), a change which took place at the same time in declarative clauses (see preceding section ‘From a flexible to a rigid word order’; Fournier 1998: §163-7, 2001). The origin of complex inversion and the first attestations of it are difficult to trace. In OF texts, we find a few examples which might be early occurrences, but are more likely to be analysed as dislocated constructions (see 8.3.3.5). Complex inversion increased in frequency from the fourteenth century on, coexisting with simple inversion, before the former ousted the latter.

In *wh*-questions, simple inversion was maintained until ModF with most interrogative markers, though restricted (with nominal subjects) to intransitive verbs from the eighteenth century on (unless the interrogative marker is the object: *Que font les enfants?* ‘What are the children doing?’). Complex inversion has developed in parallel since the sixteenth century (i.e. later than in *yes/no* questions). It progressively drove out simple inversion with transitive and attributive verbs but both constructions continued to coexist with intransitive verbs (except with *pourquoi* ‘why’):

(28) **Comment Rome pourroit-elle vivre? Comment pourroient vivre les provinces?**

(Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, 1755, p. 184)

‘How could Rome live? How could live the provinces?’

Another major change lies in the use of the canonical subject-verb order, in which interrogation is only expressed, in writing, by a punctuation mark, and, in speech, probably by specific prosody. Such a construction was attested, albeit rarely, in OF:

(29) **Vos ne savez mie de voir / se François et Flamenc vendront?** (Renart, *Dole*, early-thirteenth century, v. 2089)

‘You don’t know for sure if French and Flemish will come?’

This construction started to become more frequent from MidF on (Marchello-Nizia 1997: 418), first in *yes/no* questions (30), in direct speech, and in lower registers, though it was still in a minority. In *wh*-questions, the positioning of the interrogative marker in postverbal position (31) (as is usual in spoken ModF) seemingly happened later (but this interpretation may be due to the lack of relevant data), and with disparities between markers: some of them do not tolerate it (e.g. *quand*), whereas others favour it (e.g. *pourquoi*).

(30) Le roy appela celi prince et li dit : « **Tu es venu** de l’ost des Tartarins? » (Joinville, *Mémoires*, c. 1305, p. 234)

‘The king called the prince and said to him: “You came from the army of the Tartarins?”’

(31) Tu t’appelles comment? (Izzo, *Total Khéops*, 1995, p. 44)

‘What your name is?’

As an alternative to simple inversion, French has created a third construction: *est-ce que* interrogation, the origin of which is still in debate. It developed primarily in *wh*-questions, where it was attested as early as the thirteenth century (Foulet 1921; Elsig 2009), first with the marker *que* (direct object or subject), then, progressively from the fifteenth century on, with a growing number of interrogative markers (*pourquoi*, *comment*, *où*, etc.). This construction became the only permissible one when the question concerns an inanimate subject: *qu’est-ce*



*qui se passe?* ('what happens?'), as French has indeed always been very reluctant to use the expected construction with the relative pronoun *que* (\**Que se passe?*).

Note, however, that despite its similar surface form, the construction was not fixed as in ModF. It was a complex construction, including a relative clause, with the demonstrative pronoun *ce*—which was still stressed—as an antecedent. The construction carried strong expressiveness, which progressively weakened from the fifteenth century on, though it retained relative flexibility until the early-seventeenth century (Fournier 1998: §168):

(32) *jusques à quand sera-ce que vous m'éconnoistrez mon amour?* (Sorel, *Le Berger extravagant*, 1627, p. 162).

'Until when will it be that you will ignore my love?'

No occurrences of *est-ce que* in *yes/no* questions are found before the mid-sixteenth century, and they remain scarce until the seventeenth century (Elsig 2009; Martineau 2011). It seems likely that this late emergence resulted from the early use of complex inversion, which provided an alternative to simple inversion.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that the spread of complex inversion and *est-ce que* interrogation into *yes/no* and *wh*-questions followed opposite chronologies. In ModF *est-ce que* interrogation displays a huge number of variants depending on the position of the interrogative marker and on the internal ordering of the *est-ce que* sequence (*c'est quand qu'on mange?/quand c'est qu'on mange?*) (Chevalier 1969; Ashby 1977; Coveney 1996). Since most of these variants are found in low registers, it is not easy to trace their history, owing to a lack of relevant data before, at best, the nineteenth century.

Starting from a single construction (simple inversion) in OF, French has developed a range of alternative constructions for direct interrogation. Whereas they initially differed depending on semantic and/or pragmatic features, they henceforth differ depending on diastatic and diaphasic parameters. Situations of *immédiat communicatif* ('communicative proximity', Koch and Oesterreicher 2001) favour both 'subject-verb' (no inversion) and *est-ce que* questions, whereas situations of *distance communicative* ('communicative distance') favour simple or complex inversion as well as *est-ce que* questions.

### 8.3.2.3 Negation

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<sup>27</sup> See Waltreit 2018 for a semantic hypothesis.

The evolution of negative sentences is characterized by two major changes: first, the shift from a single negative form (*non*), inherited from Latin, to a two-form system (*non* and *ne/n*); second, the shift from simple (*ne, n'/non*) to complex negation (*ne... pas/point/mie...*), *ne* being subsequently dropped in specific contexts.

In EOF, the use of simple preverbal *non* was the standard for clause negation:

(33) Niule cose non la pouret omque pleier / La polle sempre **non amast** lo Deo menestier  
(*Eulalie*, 881, v. 9-10)

‘Nothing could ever make her give up, [so that] the girl does not love God’s service any longer’

*Ne* is attested from the eleventh century, and by the end of the century the two uses had become distinct. As a predicative form, *non* was used to negate incompletely predicative elements, in particular non-finite (infinitives) and substitute verbs (*faire, être, avoir*) (34), but in the latter case *non* was early challenged by *ne*. *Non* was maintained with infinitives until the sixteenth century, and beyond in the reinforced form *non... pas*, denoting an oppositive negation. *Non* has moreover survived over the centuries as a word-phrase in negative answers.

(34) « Or ne me demandez plus rien. » / **Non ferai ge**, ma bele suer (Renart, *Dole*, early thirteenth century, v. 1193-1194)

‘Do not ask me anything anymore. I will not do it, my dear sister’

The evolution of standard clause negation in French is usually considered a typical example of the Jespersen Cycle (Jespersen 1917), whereby a negative marker (*non/ne*) is reinforced by an additional marker (*pas/point/mie*), which subsequently becomes reanalysed as the principal exponent of negation. As the original marker has thus become redundant, it may subsequently disappear, at least in some contexts (Hansen 2014, 2018; Prévost 2020c). Negation with simple *ne* remained dominant until the mid-seventeenth century. Although reinforced negation was attested as early as the eleventh century, it remained infrequent until the late twelfth century, after which it progressively increased, more quickly in prose than in verse, in matrix clauses rather than in subordinate clauses, and in direct speech rather than in narrative, at least between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The progression accelerated in the

seventeenth century, and reinforced negation has become nearly systematic in Modern written French (on the other hand, in Modern spoken French the first part of the negation – *ne* – is often dropped, at least in some registers and almost categorically in the French of Quebec; see Chapter 2, this volume).

The two negative forms were encountered at first in different linguistic contexts. Until the thirteenth century, reinforced negation was infrequent in virtualizing contexts or with modal verbs, where simple *ne* (35) was preferred. Reinforced negation was on the contrary favoured in assertive or emphatic contexts:

(35) Et li Grieu li respondirent que **s'il ne le corounoit**, quil li couperoient le teste (Robert de Clari, *Constantinople*, early thirteenth century, p. 24)

‘And the Greeks replied that if he did not crown him, they would cut off his head.’

Reinforced negation expanded from the fourteenth century, though simple negation remained in certain uses, in particular hypothetical clauses, or with modals followed by an infinitive, until ModF. These usages are found in formal registers, and, in most cases, reinforced negation may be used as a variant (‘Il ne peut (pas) se résoudre à déménager’, ‘he can't make up his mind to move house’).

Reinforced markers all originate from nouns denoting a small quantity: *pas* (‘step’), *point* (‘point’), *mie* (‘crumb’), *gote* (‘drop’), and it is difficult to assess precisely when they grammaticalized, though probably very early in the case of *pas*. There are significant discrepancies in the frequency of occurrence of the different markers, also depending on the dialects. *Gote* was always infrequent, whereas *pas* or *mie* were dominant until the late thirteenth century, when *mie* started to recede, before disappearing in the sixteenth century. *Point* began to spread in the late thirteenth century, and the variation *pas/mie* was then replaced by the variation *pas/point*, though *point* remained less frequent and therefore a marked form.<sup>28</sup> It became a marginal variant in the nineteenth century, and was henceforth used in formal registers. The evolution of these different forms is a typical illustration of the successive processes at work in grammaticalization: paradigmaticization, obligatorification<sup>29</sup> (Lehmann 1995 [1982]), then specialization (Hopper 1991). Note that these markers have

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<sup>28</sup> There seems to have been some functional differences, as *pas de pain* is not attested in OF whereas *point* and *mie* are found (*point de pain*, *mie de pain*).

<sup>29</sup> The fact of becoming obligatory.

always preferentially occupied a postverbal position (even if we find occurrences in preverbal position, in particular *point*, probably for emphasis):

- (36) La vielle illeuc **point ne sejourne** (Jean de Meung, *Rose*, late thirteenth century, v. 12511)  
'the old woman there not stays'

Negation with simple *pas* is encountered as early as the thirteenth century in interrogative clauses, and it has been continuously attested (Price 1978, 1993; Martineau and Vinet 2005), though with a low frequency until ModF.

- (37) **M'avez vos pas bien esprouvee?** (*Rose*, v. 16479)  
'Have(n't) you put me sufficiently to the test?'

The emergence of simple *pas* in declarative clauses, on the contrary, occurred much later, not before the seventeenth, or even the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> There is, on the other hand, agreement as regards the fact that simple *pas* developed first among speakers with a low level of literacy, before it spread to all speakers. Yet the fact remains that some specific communicative situations (such as direct speech) tend to favour it while it is precluded in more formal registers.

Temporal/aspectual negation (*ne...plus/mais/ja/onques/ainc*) has undergone several changes. The main one lies in the switch from a system relying on different forms according to the temporal orientation (past or future) to a system with a single form, *jamais*. Until MidF, mainly *onques* (multiple spellings), and *ainc* (*ainz/ainques*) to a lesser extent, were used for past orientation (38), whereas *ja* was reserved for contexts denoting future (39) or atemporal contexts (general truths):

- (38) **Ainc n'i menja n'onques n'i but / N'ainc del temple ne se remut** (Gautier de Coincy, *Miracles 1*, early thirteenth century, v. 1265-6)

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<sup>30</sup> There are, however, numerous examples in *Journal d'Héroard*, 1601-28. Ayres Bennett 1994, 2004; Gadet 2000; Ashby 2001; Martineau and Mougeon 2003; Martineau and Vinet 2005; Dufter and Stark 2007; Ingham 2011; Martineau 2011.

‘Never did [he] eat there, nor never did [he] drink, nor never did [he] move from the temple’

(39) « Tos consiliers **ja non estrai** » (*Léger*, c. 1000, v. 91-2)

‘your advisor [I] will no longer be’

However, *ja* gained ground in past contexts in MidF, resulting in the loss of *ainc*, while *onques* disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, from the eleventh century on, the three forms could be reinforced by *mes/mais*. *Ainc mes* and *onques mes* are not attested beyond the fifteenth century, whereas *ja mes* gained ground over simple *ja* and in past-oriented contexts. And from the fourteenth century on, the discontinuous form *ja mes* became infrequent and was replaced by *james/jamais* (already attested in the eleventh century).

#### 8.3.2.4 Dislocated and cleft-constructions

ModF can use various constructions to make some informational dimensions of the utterance explicit, which compensate for the henceforth relatively rigid word order, namely presentative (*il y a/j'ai ma voiture qui est en panne* ‘I have my car broken down’), dislocated, and cleft sentences, which developed at different periods. Due to the lack of relevant data for the older stages of the language, it is difficult to trace back the emergence of presentative constructions, which are therefore not considered here (for their use in ModF, see Chapter 2, this volume).

Contrary to widespread opinion, dislocated constructions are not restricted to colloquial speech. They are used in standard written French, and both left and right dislocations have been attested since the eleventh century:

(40) et **la roïne**, / Laidisent **la**, mot **la** menacent (Beroul, *Tristan*, late-twelfth century, v. 774-5)

‘And the queen, they outrage her, they threaten her seriously’

The early attested constructions display the same morphosyntactic characteristics as ModF constructions as regards, on the one hand, the nature of the dislocated element (though personal pronouns are quite infrequent until the mid-fourteenth century) and, on the other hand, the nature (personal, demonstrative or adverbial pronoun, or even a noun) and the

function (subject, object, attribute, adverbial) of the resumptive element. In contrast, a major change took place on the pragmatic level. In ModF, dislocated constructions mainly aim to promote a topic (Ashby 1988; Lambrecht 1994; Chapter 2, this volume). This was already the case in OF (see the example (40) above); but it also happens that, although the dislocated element denotes a cognitively accessible referent (definite NPs or proper names), it has a focal status, and the construction must be understood like a modern presentative (Marchello-Nizia 1998):

(41) La reregarde des .XII. cumpaignuns / Ne lesserat bataille ne lur dunt. / **Li nies Marsilie, il est venuz avant** (*Roland*, v. 858-61)

‘At the rear, the twelve companions will not fail to engage in combat. Here Marsil’s nephew he comes forward’

Still more surprisingly for a modern speaker, the dislocated NP could denote an inactive, or even unidentifiable, referent, and the construction was then equivalent to a modern cleft sentence:

(42) Ço set hom ben, n’ai cure de manace; / Mais **saives hom, il** deit faire message (*Roland*, v. 293-4).

‘This everyone knows, I do not fear threat: but it is a wise man who has to convey the message’

Such a focalization function was rarer than the topicalization function and it is not attested beyond MidF.

Cleft sentences were very rare until the thirteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Many seemingly similar constructions were actually relative or verb-complement clauses. Moreover, until the fifteenth century, the range of elements that could be clefted was much more restricted than in ModF; they were mainly NPs and pronouns, rarely verbs or adverbs (Rouquier 2020):

(43) « En non Deu, sire, c'est **Ami de Clermont**, / Qui noz laissa ceste bone maison »  
(*Ami et Amile*, c. 1200, v. 2546-7)

'In the name of God, Sire, it is Ami de Clermont who left us this good house'

The cleft sentence is most often used to confirm or invalidate a previous identification. From the sixteenth-seventeenth century on, the range of elements that could be clefted started to diversify, with the introduction first of adverbs, and then of prepositional phrases, infinitives, some subordinate clauses, etc. In ModF, almost any element can be clefted.

(44) Au surplus ce fut **là** que nous vismes aussi premierement des Perroquets (*Léry, Bresil*, 1578, p. 107)

'Moreover, it was there that we first saw parrots'

In prepositional cleft constructions, the preposition can precede or follow the clefted element, both options being attested from OF onwards. The third option, with the doubling of the preposition, is not encountered before the fifteenth century, and it always remained infrequent. In ModF it is considered an archaism (Jones 1996) and/or pertaining to a low register:

(45) c'est **à moy à** qui appartient l'honneur (*Palissy, Recepte veritable*, 1563, p. 176)

'It is to me to whom the honour belongs'

The person and tense agreement of the verb *être* has changed over the centuries. Person agreement is a long-debated question.<sup>32</sup> In OF, in the case of clefted personal pronouns, the verb agreed with the latter, and not with *ce*, which may suggest that *ce* should be analysed as an attribute and the personal pronoun as the subject. While still attested in the fifteenth century, this kind of agreement disappeared in the sixteenth century:

(46) ço **sui jo** que ai pecchied (*Li Quatre Livre des Reis*, late twelfth century, cited by Rouquier 2020: 1313)

this am I who sinned ('I am the one who sinned')

As regards tense agreement, two usages have coexisted since OF: either *être* agrees in tense with the verb of the subordinate clause (47) or it is in the indicative present, whatever the tense of the other verb is (46 above):

(47) ce **n'estoit** pas pour li que elle **ploroit** (Joinville, *Mémoires*, c. 1305, cited by Rouquier 2020: 1313)

'It was not for him that she was crying'

It has been suggested that the increasing use of cleft sentences from the sixteenth century on may be related to changes in prosody as well as to the rigidification of word order, as the near-disappearance of preverbal objects and the decrease in postverbal subjects resulted in the loss of useful means of focalization (Wehr 2005).

### 8.3.2.5 The complex sentence

This section addresses only some of the manifold aspects of the evolution of the complex sentence (i.e. including more than one clause), which, it is worth emphasizing, emerged as a unit only in the seventeenth century, the very notion of the sentence being of questionable relevance for French before then.

To account for the general evolution of the sentence would require several pages (Siouffi 2020; Combettes and Glikman 2020: 1338-42). In brief, it may be said that OF was characterized by a low frequency of subordinate clauses, to the benefit of sequences of coordinated or juxtaposed simple clauses. This feature is probably linked to the fact that early texts were mostly transmitted orally. From MidF onward, sentences became more complex, due to a range of factors, including the increase in silent reading and the growth of writing in prose. MidF is also characterized by the influence of Latin with many Latin works translated into French. This resulted in a return to the Latin period, with a 'stacking' syntax (i.e. subordinate clauses that follow one another, without being fully integrated into the overall



architecture of the sentence). From pre-classical French onwards, subordinate clauses are integrated more tightly into the overall syntactic construction of the sentence.

Whilst changes affecting relative and complement clauses resulted in their increasing integration into the sentence, the evolution of adverbial clauses is less clear. Their semantic diversity has always induced a variable degree of integration, depending on the type of adverbial. In this regard, it is worth noting that the marked increase in conjunctive phrases, especially from MidF, enabled more precise and specific marking of the different types of subordination than the use of simple *que*, which tended to behave as an all-purpose conjunction (Combettes and Glikman 2020; Combettes 2020a: 897-911). The progressive decline of constructions with tmesis (48) can be interpreted as a looser integration of the clause in the sentence:

(48) Mes **ainz** fu la novele dite / Au chastel, **que** il i venissent (Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, v. 3292)

‘But the news was announced at the castle before they arrived’

As regards completive clauses, the major change relates to how they were integrated into the sentence. In OF, they were mostly introduced by *que*, but they could also be constructed without any marker (asyndeton). Such a construction was still attested in MidF, and is even encountered in spoken ModF, where it is, however, considered informal:

(49) Pui li dites il n'en irat, s'il me creit (*Roland*, v. 2752)

‘Then tell him [that] he will not leave, if he believes me’

In OF, complement clauses could also be introduced by *ce que*, and the two forms could be disjointed:

(50) Co sent Rollant qe la mort li est près (*Roland*, v. 2259)

‘Roland feels [that] death is approaching’

*Ce que* was maintained until the sixteenth century, but from then on it is only found after a preposition (e.g. *à ce que, de ce que*), simple *que* being no longer a possible option in such contexts (Combettes 1996).

As regards relative clauses, two points are worth mentioning. First, whereas the relative pronoun, whatever its function, could initially be separated from its antecedent by different elements (51), we observe an increasing adjacency between them, even though occurrences of disjunction are still attested in the sixteenth century, something which remains possible in ModF if the relative clause depends on the subject of the main clause (52):

(51) Quant toute **ceste compaignie** fut passée, **que** l'on estimoit à cent mil chevaulx  
(Commynes, *Mémoires*, late fifteenth century, p. 49)

‘When all this company had ridden past, the number of which was estimated at one hundred thousand horses’

(52) **Un homme** entra, **qui** était tout vêtu de noir

‘A man entered, who was all dressed in black’

Second, OF texts display occurrences of relative clauses without an antecedent, the relative pronoun referring either to a specific referent (53) or to a non-specific one. The latter case, while attested in ModF, has an archaic flavour (54):

(53) Ki lui portat, süef le fist nurrir (*Alexis*, c. 1050, v. 32)

‘The one who bore him tenderly nurtured him’

(54) qui veut voyager loin ménage sa monture (proverb)

‘If you want to travel far, you must spare your horse’

Though often having a subject function, the relative pronoun can also fulfil other functions, and the construction without an antecedent has remained in some dative constructions (e.g. *Donne-le à qui tu veux* ‘give it (to) whom you wish’), as well as with the relative pronoun *où*: *va (là) où tu veux* (‘go where you want’).

Despite a few occurrences in OF, it was from MidF on that the relative clause without an antecedent could stand alone, taking on a hypothetical value (requiring a subjunctive or

conditional form). This usage disappeared in the seventeenth century, and survives only in the expression *comme qui dirait* (= *comme si on disait* ‘as if one said’):

(55) Qui eust peü avoir ce lieu, Gennes eust esté fort à destroit (Commynes, *Mémoires* 8, early-sixteenth century, p.145)

‘If one could have had this place, Genoa would have been in great distress’.

## 8.4 Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, the evolution of French morphosyntax and syntax displays the same main features as those of the other Romance languages: a gradual reduction of the case system, an increase in auxiliary verb structures, and a gradual shift towards a relatively fixed word order, all features which characterize an expanding configurational syntax (Ledgeway 2011). More specifically, French has created new grammatical categories (e.g. articles, tenses with auxiliaries) or structures (e.g. interrogative variants) and pushed further than the other Romance languages the specialization of other categories (e.g. distinction between determiners and pronouns for demonstratives, possessives and indefinites). Besides the almost complete loss of the nominal declension (at least for case), French has also undergone radical simplifications as regards verb morphology, resulting from analogical remodelling of the stems and from a partial syncretization of inflections. These major changes in both nominal and verbal domains account, at least partially, for the progressive rigidification of word order to the benefit of SV(O) and the obligatorification of subject expression, two features that set French somewhat apart from some other Romance languages (e.g. Italian), which have kept more flexibility.

### **Appendix: Texts cited in the examples and abbreviated form of the title used**

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