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PART III

## **Deixis in a diamesic dimension**



# Clitic subjects in French text messages

## Does technical change provoke and/or reveal linguistic change?\*

Elisabeth Stark  
Universität Zurich

This study investigates the graphical realization of clitic subjects in about 4600 French text messages taken from the Swiss corpus of text messages ([www.sms4science.ch](http://www.sms4science.ch)). It analyzes different spelling strategies against the background of the present debate concerning the (still) argumental or (already) purely morphosyntactic (as agreement markers) status of clitic subjects in contemporary French or in a non-standard variety of it (“European Colloquial French”, following Culbertson 2010). As none of three crucial phenomena correlated with the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’, i.e. absence of clitics in inversion structures, fusional spelling tendencies for more than one preverbal clitic element and subject doubling, are attested in a significant way in our data, French text messages from Switzerland do not document any linguistic change nor a norm change in the realm of subject marking.

### 1. Introduction – Preliminary remarks on culture and linguistic change

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute to the present discussion on the status of French clitic subjects as pronominals and thereby verbal arguments or mere agreement markers with affix-like properties.

Evidence is drawn from a quantitative and qualitative analysis of French text messages from the newly established Swiss SMS corpus, cf. ([www.sms4science.ch](http://www.sms4science.ch)). Despite of the graphical character of these data, which does not permit any direct

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\* I want to thank Lene Schøsler, University of Copenhagen, for having organized a very inspiring workshop on “Deixis and Pronouns in Romance” in May 2011, and the audience of my talk at this occasion for very helpful comments, especially Ulrich Detges and Brian Joseph, as well as the audience of the Munich LIPP symposium on “Language change” in July 2011, where I presented an updated version and received very helpful comments from Andreas Dufter and Elena Skribnik. My special thanks go to the anonymous reviewer. All remaining errors are, of course, mine.

generalizations on ongoing changes in phonic, oral French, they are, by their very informal nature, likely to partially reflect ongoing changes in spoken French (in the sense of informal language use, cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2011 [1990]). Even if a certain influence of writing norms in the spelling of text messages can never be excluded, several of their typical features, especially the so-called “phonetic spelling” (cf. Anis 2007), point in fact to the intention of their authors to imitate the actual phonetic realization of the linguistic material used rather than to follow the standard orthography, which is possible in the informal communication contexts text messages are used for in the overwhelming majority of cases. They may even partially develop their own spelling conventionalizations, different from standard orthography, but, as we will see, in close interdependency with phonic language use, and this makes them a valuable, though very special, source also for historical investigations in French morphosyntax.

This paper is organized as follows: In the remainder of this introductory section, I will discuss some general reflections concerning linguistic change and language change. In Section 2, I will introduce some major arguments in the discussion on the grammatical status of French clitic subjects, before formulating my main research question concerning the relevance of text messages for linguistic or language change in Section 3. Section 4 will shortly present the data base, the Swiss corpus of text messages, before I will present the results of the analysis in Section 5 and discuss them in Section 6. A final conclusion will try to answer the question whether and how my type of data can contribute to the question of language and linguistic change in (informal or colloquial) French.

One important general question to ask whenever we think about changes in linguistic phenomena of sentence structure concerns the potential interdependency between changes in the structures of languages and cultural changes at the social, political, or technical levels. Functionalists often tend to take an interdependency perspective, whereas formal approaches to human language are reluctant to admit a direct mutual influence between the human language faculty and cognitive, physical, or other human systems (cf. Hauser et al. 2002).

As for the question of micro-variation and change, i.e. phenomena observable inside the complex variationist architecture of one specific language (cf. Oesterreicher 2001), the historical linguist is also concerned with the interdependency between changes in the different varieties of a specific language (diatopic, diastratic, diaphasic varieties) with the traditional and innovative forms and (technical) means of communication available to its speakers and with changes in the overall structure of that language.

In order to explore these questions by investigating a particular phenomenon of contemporary French morphosyntax, i.e. the status of clitic subjects, some terminological distinctions need to be made. In fact, we must investigate

two questions, which concern two different types of change in language. Following Posner (<sup>2</sup>2007), we should make a distinction between *linguistic change* and *language change*. Linguistic change is structural change, and its locus is the internal knowledge that an individual speaker has about his/her language. Change in structure is unconscious and unintentional (e.g. *reanalysis*, cf. Langacker 1977; Andersen 2001a), and it pertains to the underlying grammatical system of a language or variety. Language change, on the other hand, is a type of change that takes place in the *norm* or the *usage* of a language; it is usually externally motivated, socially relevant, conscious, and intentional (e.g. the *adoption*, for rhetorical reasons, of a new expression stemming from an influential magazine by its readers, cf. Coseriu 1974).

When applying these fundamental observations to the topic of the present volume, i.e. changes in the expression of deixis and pronoun systems in Romance languages, we might now wonder whether “the *linguistic structuring of basic concepts* of person, place and time in Romance languages [...] may be related to *mental parameters and other extra-linguistic circumstances*” (original description taken from the corresponding workshop, emphasis mine). This is a workable hypothesis with regards to lexical items for concepts such as ‘speaker’, ‘listener’, as well as in situations in which the usage and interpretation of linguistic structures are concerned. See for example the ban on *vous*<sub>2.PL</sub> as a distance signalling allocutive form during the French Revolution and the interpretation of *round table* as a democratic forum, and not only as a piece of furniture (Pomino & Stark 2010). Nevertheless, non-linguistic mental parameters and extra-linguistic circumstances are unlikely to influence linguistic grammatical structures in a narrow sense, for example agreement or the question whether to use expletives<sup>1</sup> or not. These are all linguistic elements for which there is no semantic interpretation, and which are very difficult to understand from a functional point of view (cf. Haiman 1985: 162ff.; see also Jackendoff 2002,<sup>2</sup> who draws a sharp line between (the theory of) the usage of language and its structure).

Yet, the historical linguist is usually dealing exclusively with concrete data, i.e. texts of whatever genre from one or different periods of a given language or

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1. This term designates any morphological element that does not contribute anything to the meaning of a sentence (and is accordingly not allowed to be interpreted by the semantics interface), but must fill a syntactic position in certain languages, like the ‘impersonal’ *il* in *il est difficile de te comprendre* (cf. Moro <sup>2</sup>2009).

2. “But, on the other hand, a theory of communicative competence and/or performance doesn’t eliminate the need for a theory of grammatical structure. No matter how well speakers can coordinate their activity, *they still have to put the verb in its right place in their sentences.*” (Jackendoff 2002: 35, emphasis mine).

variety. And these data give, if any, only indirect hints at the nature of the changes they might be triggered by.

New variants in data are cases of actualization, i.e. “the observable manifestation of grammar innovations in speech” (Andersen 2001b: 225). However, these variation phenomena might be indicators for a change in *base grammar* or just in *usage rules* (cf. Andersen 2001b). So how can we tell whether we deal with *internally* (=evolutive) or *externally* induced change (cf. Andersen 2001a: 33f.)? Here, the following reflections of Andersen (2001a: 33f.) might be helpful:

In the internally motivated, evolutive change, perhaps, the usage rules are gradually adjusted to incorporate an innovation that is unmarked in relation to the productive rules of the core grammar, and which is first admitted to unmarked environments; only as the innovation loses its novelty does it spread from unmarked contexts to marked contexts. In the externally motivated change, by contrast, usage rules are presumably directly modified to conform to the external model; the innovation is pragmatically motivated and occurs first in the most salient, most monitored, marked environments, from which it may spread, as it loses its novelty, to less salient, unmarked environments.

Interpreting the notoriously difficult concept of *markedness* in its most widespread sense (*unmarked* = frequent, default), we might then consider the markedness of a linguistic environment of a relatively new variant as a possible indicator for its origin (internal or external, see below, Section 6).

Additionally, actualization makes innovations usually gradually visible in texts. We always find *gradual* observable changes as described by *grammaticalization* theory (cf. Lehmann 1985; Heine & Kuteva 2002) in concrete data (e.g. texts).<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, we will try to carefully apply these notional distinctions and reflections to the problem of the present status of clitic subjects in French, in a corpus of text messages, with a special focus on new spelling variants and their potential indication of an ongoing linguistic and/or language change in French.

## 2. The status of French clitic subjects: (short) State of the Art

The historical development from optional Lat. subject pronouns like *ego*<sub>1.SG</sub> (pro-drop) towards obligatory Fr. *je*<sub>1.SG</sub> is an often cited case of grammaticalization (cf. e.g. Lehmann 1985: 47), and thereby an instance of an evolutive, internally motivated change (cf. Andersen 2001b: 241). However, the exact position of French clitic subjects on the grammaticalization scale between free pronouns on

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3. “Grammaticalization is defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms [...] and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms” (Heine & Kuteva 2002: 2).

the one extreme and fusional agreement affixes on the other is far from being clear and undisputed. On the contrary, the old debate concerning a potential affixal status of French clitic subjects has been reopened recently by the works of Kaiser 1992, 2003, 2008; De Cat 2005 and Culbertson 2010, among others.

While the phonologically clitical nature of these elements is generally acknowledged, their syntactic position (as real arguments in the canonical subject position assumed in the generative framework, i.e. in the specifier of IP/TP, SpecIP/SpecTP, like originally proposed by Kayne 1975 or Rizzi 1986, or as agreement markers, in generative terms, inside  $I^0/T^0$ , i.e. as parts of the inflected verb, like proposed by Kaiser 1992, 2003; cf. Culbertson 2010: 89) is an object of great debate, especially when different varieties of French other than the standard are considered in their phonic, i.e. spoken form.

On the one hand, De Cat 2005 rejects the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’, because, according to her, the predictions that are implied by this hypothesis are not borne out empirically. On the other hand, Culbertson 2010 claims that

[...] (i) European Colloquial French exhibits differences from Standard European French that impact how subject clitics are best analyzed, and (ii) subject clitics in European Colloquial French are inflectional agreement markers, not phonological clitic arguments. (Culbertson 2010: 86)

This discussion concerns a whole number of morphosyntactic properties of French clitic subjects, which are different in standard and non-standard varieties.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, we will choose four crucial aspects of this discussion, present them shortly and try to analyze them empirically in our corpus of French text messages (see below, Sections 4 and 5).

First, let us focus on three main correlations of the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’, which are also discussed extensively in De Cat 2005 and Culbertson 2010, see the following quote from De Cat 2005:

[...] a. Subject clitics should not be available for syntactic operations independently of their host.  
 b. Preverbal clitics appearing between the subject clitic and the verb also have to be analyzed as affixes. These elements include *en*, *y*, object clitics and the negation particle *ne*.  
 c. Subject doubling is predicted (i.e. the [*obligatory*, ES] co-occurrence of an XP in [spec, TP] and of an adjacent subject clitic). (De Cat 2005: 1196)<sup>5</sup>

4. Which only doubtfully however can be grouped under such a fuzzy label as “European Colloquial French”, cf. Dufter & Stark 2002 for a discussion of the complexity of the different dimensions of variation for French.

5. *XP* means any kind of full sentence constituent, *TP* means “Tense Phrase”, i.e. the generative label for the inflected verb and its arguments.



Especially the last correlation is crucial in this discussion, as Culbertson 2010 puts it:

Doubling of a true argument DP by a clitic in the same simple clause can be taken as the critical diagnostic for differentiating agreement clitics from arguments. (Culbertson 2010: 105)<sup>6</sup>

Here, frequency accounts play a major role, as an increase in doubling constructions in the available (usually spoken) French corpora might indeed indicate an increasing grammaticalization of clitic subjects or subject clitics as agreement markers. In fact, Culbertson (2010: 115ff.) shows that subject doubling is extremely frequent in child-directed speech (82% in her corpus), but also quite frequent generally (60% of the subjects in the PFC corpus are doubled by clitics, 67% among the subjects produced by speakers younger than 35).

As for the first aspect (cf. a. in the citation of De Cat 2005 above), the mobility of clitic arguments, e.g. in inversion constructions (cf. De Cat 2005: 1198–1200), vs. the alleged fixed position of affixes, it has been repeatedly shown that mobile affixes do exist in the languages of the world (cf. e.g. Nevis & Joseph 1992 on the Lithuanian reflexive marker *-(s)i-*).

Additionally, verb-subject inversion with clitic subjects “in spontaneous Colloquial French [...] is vanishingly rare” (Culbertson 2010: 100; cf. also Cabredo-Hofherr 2004: 106, on this point). This is the first property of clitic subjects that we will investigate empirically in our corpus (cf. Section 5).

The second assumption (cf. b. in the citation of De Cat 2005 above) resulting from the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’, i.e. the assumption of an affixal character of every element possible between clitic subjects and the finite verb (object clitics and the negation particle *ne*), is difficult to corroborate, especially for *ne*. This element has at least two different values in French (a negative one and an expletive one) and is variable as to its position with finite verbs and infinitival verbal elements (cf. De Cat 2005: 1201–1203, see also Culbertson 2010: 94). Yet, the observable almost mutual exclusion of clitic subjects and clitic preverbal *ne* in contemporary informal or colloquial French (see, among others, Dufter & Stark 2007; cf. Culbertson 2010: 94ff.) is exactly pointing in this direction: a non-affixal element like *ne* cannot stand between an affix, i.e. the clitic subject, and its stem, i.e. the inflected verb, and that could explain this phenomenon without arguing for an affixal status of *ne*.

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6. *DP* is coextensive with the traditional NP, i.e. it designates a nominal containing a lexical element plus a determiner like an article etc.

Additionally, many researchers have indeed observed agglutination or even fusion among preverbal clitics in French in the phonic code, like in the following two examples. These phenomena are lexically restricted (e.g. possible with *suis*, ‘am’, but not with homophonous *suis*, ‘follow’), like it is often the case for affixes (cf. Culbertson 2010: 90f.):

- (1) a. [zezevy] for ⟨je les ai vus⟩ ‘I have seen them’  
 b. [ʒɥidire] for ⟨je le lui dirai⟩ ‘I will tell it to him’

A potential graphical reflex of this phenomenon in our SMS data, which, remember, contain many phenomena of non-standard “phonetic spelling” according to Anis 2007, thus indicating the actual speakers’ variants used in informal contexts, will also be object of our empirical corpus investigation (cf. Section 4 for more general reflections on this point and Section 5).

The third and most crucial aspect for an adequate analysis of clitic subjects as agreement markers or arguments (cf. c. in the citation of De Cat 2005 above), the one of obligatory subject doubling, has already been discussed partly as to its empirical quantitative investigation. Even if subject-verb agreement does not have to be obligatory with any kind of subject,<sup>8</sup> it still has to be very frequent. Furthermore, real subject-doubling constructions are not informationally marked, e.g. as topic-marking or even topic-shifting constructions, i.e. are not cases of dislocations (cf. Lambrecht 1994). In the literature, there is no agreement to this point for informal French (cf. De Cat 2005: 1204–1210 vs. Culbertson 2010: 106–114), but the detailed analyses showing the unmarked prosodic profile of doubling constructions in “European Colloquial French” presented in Culbertson (2010: 107–110) are rather convincing. This point has to be left open here, as our data are purely graphic in nature and cannot inform about prosody at all (see Section 4). Still, in front of various phenomena of “phonetic spelling” (see e.g. examples (4) and (5) below) and given the fact that authors of text messages quite frequently use more characters than necessary for emphasis or other reasons (cf. Thurlow & Poff 2013),

7. Cf. in a similar vein already Darmesteter (1877:4), Kaiser (2008:311, Footnote 7), Schwarze 2001.

8. Cf. Corbett 2006, Chapter 6, and Culbertson’s “matching hypothesis”: Culbertson claims that “[...] an agreement marker and its argument controller must match featurally” as to the discourse-semantic features [+definite] and [+accessible] (2010: 121), the last one meaning ‘accessible to the hearer’s interpretation’ by givenness, being part of the general background knowledge etc. Mismatching features trigger then a phonologically empty element as default agreement marker, e.g. with quantified or other indefinite subject XPs in “European Colloquial French”.

we can expect and count cases of subject-doubling in our data and will thus come back to this crucial aspect of the discussion in Section 5.

A final aspect of the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’ concerns cases of ellipses.<sup>9</sup> If a lexical XP is occupying the subject-argument slot in the sentence and if its absence can then be interpreted as a pro-drop construction, the remaining clitic being a pure agreement marker (cf. Culbertson 2010: 124 for a convincing argumentation that “European Colloquial French” can be considered a pro-drop variety), the complete absence of lexical and clitic subjects remains still difficult to be interpreted. Even if, as we just pointed out, agreement markers are not compulsory in all cases, their absence, at least with definite and accessible<sup>10</sup> subjects, should not be attested at all, contrary to subjects, which can be dropped also in non pro-drop languages, e.g. as instances of topic-drop (cf. Sigurðsson 2011) or in certain genres like telegraphs. Especially agreement markers for first and second person referents, which are always definite and accessible in the respective situation, should not be dropped at all, not even under the assumption of Culbertson’s 2010 “matching hypothesis” (see above). Traditionally, contemporary French is considered a non pro-drop language, partially because it possesses lexical expletives (cf. Kaiser 2003). Yet, these elements can also be dropped, especially in non-standard varieties of French (cf. Auger 1993), e.g. in (*il*) *faut* (‘one must/needs’), (*il*) *paraît* (‘it seems’), (*il*) *y a* (‘there is/are’), but not, for example, with weather verbs (*\*pleut*, ‘\*rains’, cf. Kaiser 2003: 259), and neither in subordinate sentences nor in preverbal clitic clusters (cf. Kaiser 2008: 315). All these instances of subject ellipses will thus be at least a difficult case for the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’ and constitute one central object of investigation in our corpus analysis (see below, Section 5).

### 3. Research question

After this general discussion, our guiding research question can be formulated as follows: How much insight can data like text messages give into linguistic change

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9. We will not go into the aspect of coordination reduction here, i.e. into cases of conjuncts with the clitic subject missing in the second conjunct: *Il mange et boit trop* (‘He eats and drinks too much’), another argument against the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’. Culbertson (2010: 101ff.) shows that this kind of ellipsis is rare, if not inexistent, in “European Colloquial French”, yet, it is still a grammatical construction.

10. See Footnote 8.

(in French)? They are surely a special type of speech data, i.e. they are likely to contain innovative variants as the results of actualization; yet, these variants cannot directly be interpreted as innovations caused by internal (i.e. structural) or external (e.g. cultural or technological) change.

To put it more concretely: What do special graphical realizations of clitic subjects in French text messages tell us about their potential status in the system of the respective varieties of their authors? Text messages are graphically realized, i.e. they do not directly reflect the corresponding phonic utterances, but they are graphical productions in a rather ‘norm-free’ context, where the pressure of normative orthography, which is particularly high in the French culture, is supposedly rather weak (but still present, cf. Meisenburg 1996 and Thurlow and Poff 2013, Béguelin 2012, Stark 2011 on the question of the French orthography, graphical variation and the variationist profile of text messages). And still, the kind of semi-spontaneous writing we often find in text messages may contain indicators of linguistic change.<sup>11</sup> Many graphical variants found in text messages are only to be explained in a strong dependency from the phonic realization of the corresponding utterances (“phonetic spelling”), which permits to formulate the hypothesis that this kind of writing reflects much more directly than standard orthography the authors’ internal knowledge of their language or variety. This line of reasoning will most strongly conduct our empirical study (cf. Section 5).

Additionally, we might ask whether the relatively new form of graphical production we find in the new media is in itself a factor that triggers or promotes language change in French and widens the acceptability of orthographic variants, at least in a ‘democratizing’ way (cf. Anis 2007). This is a different kind of question, as we have pointed out in Section 1, and will not be discussed in what follows.

#### 4. Data base: The Swiss corpus of text messages sms4science.ch

The corpus our study is based upon is the first Swiss reference corpus of authentic text messages. It was established by a public collection campaign from September 11th 2009 through January 31st 2010 and comprises 24’988 text messages, sent by 2’627 people (18% of text messages stemming from the Western, i.e. French speaking, part, 82% from the German speaking and Italian/Romansh speaking

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11. In this context Béguelin (2012) speaks appropriately about the “‘réappropriation spontanée’ de la graphie par les sujets” (47).

part of Switzerland, cf. Dürscheid & Stark 2011 for further information about the corpus and its design, cf. also [www.sms4science.ch](http://www.sms4science.ch)).<sup>12</sup> 75% of the text messages in the corpus are linked to sociodemographic information about their authors, i.e. sex, age, mother tongue(s), professional background etc., as the participants were asked to fill in an anonymous online questionnaire after having sent their text messages.

The main quantitative results of this gathering can be consulted under ([www.sms4science.ch](http://www.sms4science.ch)). One striking characteristic of the Swiss corpus of text messages in contrast with other comparable corpora is its multilingual character; we found more than 10'000 text messages in Swiss German dialect, followed by some 7'000 in non-dialectal German and 4'600 in French, but also text messages in Italian, Romansh, English, Spanish, Slavonic etc. (see Dürscheid & Stark 2011 for more detailed information).

For the present study, we conducted a manual analysis of the first 400 French text messages, i.e. approximately 10% of the French part of the corpus.

We found 1036 cases of subject-verb<sub>fin</sub> combinations and classified them according to the following parameters:

- grammatical person and number of the subjects;
- morphological exponents of the subject (ellipsis, clitics, lexical subjects, *qui, nous on, ça, ce, XP-cl*);
- cases of subject inversion;
- graphical realization of the subject (standard or near standard or e.g. letter-number homophones, cf. Thurlow 2003);
- presence and graphical realization of other proclitic elements (object clitics, *en/y*, negation particle *ne*);
- cases of XP-cl-combinations (dislocations?);<sup>13</sup>
- cases of subject ellipsis.

The last five parameters are in direct relation to the four aspects of the 'agreement marker hypothesis' for French clitic subjects discussed in Section 2: subject-inversion

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12. In the meantime, a second collection campaign conducted in summer 2011 resulted in additional 1959 text messages from the Italian and Romansh speaking part of the country, thereby changing the general numbers mentioned above. Yet, the present study has been based on the older version of the corpus, and the numbers and quantitative findings indicated are accordingly referring to that version.

13. By *XP-cl-combinations* I mean the combination of a lexical subject, e.g. *mon père*, and a coreferential clitic, e.g. *il*, like in *Mon père il adore le sport*.

might be a (weak) counter-argument against the affixal status of clitic subjects, whereas a strikingly frequent agglutinative or fusional spelling of these elements, alone or together with other proclitic elements, would support it. Very frequent XP-cl-combinations might indicate an ongoing grammaticalization of clitics as agreement markers, although it might be the case that the graphic nature of our data and the pressure to save time and money in typing text messages inhibits subject doubling compared to phonic corpora for independent reasons (see below, Section 5.4). Yet, obligatory grammatical information is usually preserved also in text messages (cf. Stark 2011 for French subject-verb agreement), so that the absence of subject-doubling structures in our corpus can count as counter-evidence to the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’. Finally also (certain types of) subject ellipsis can be problematic for the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’, at least ellipsis of highly definite and accessible<sup>14</sup> clitic subjects (referents).

## 5. Corpus analysis: Results

### 5.1 General results

As can be seen from Table 1, first-person singular subjects are by far the most frequent ones in our French text messages, followed by the third person and second person singular:

**Table 1.** Person and number of the 1036 subjects analyzed

Subjects (person, number)	
Expletive	33
1SG	398
2SG	199
3SG	256
1PL	126
2PL	18
3PL	6
Total	1036

14. See Footnote 8.

The different morphological exponents, including cases of ellipses, can be seen in the following Table 2:

**Table 2.** Morphological exponents of the 1036 subjects analyzed

Morphological exponents	
Ellipsis	52
<i>je</i>	366
<i>tu</i>	196
<i>il</i>	24
<i>il</i> impers.	19
<i>elle</i>	10
<i>ce</i>	74
<i>ça</i>	80
<i>on</i>	115
<i>nous</i>	9
<i>vous</i>	18
<i>ils</i>	0
<i>elles</i>	1
LEX	57
<i>qui</i>	12
<i>nous on</i>	2
<i>ça ce</i>	1
Total	1036

$\langle Je_{1.Sg.} \rangle$  and its allomorphs is by far the most frequent morphological subject exponent in our sub-corpus, followed by  $\langle tu_{2.Sg.} \rangle$  and  $\langle on_{3.Sg.} \rangle$  (very frequently meaning ‘we’, despite of being morphologically and etymologically a generic pronoun with third person singular features).

## 5.2 Subject inversion

Some cases of subject-verb-inversion are found in our corpus in interrogative structures, as can be seen in Table 3:

**Table 3.** Subject inversion among the 1036 subjects analyzed

<i>je</i>	4	15%
<i>tu</i>	15	56%
<i>il</i>	0	0%
<i>il impers.</i>	1	4%
<i>nous</i>	2	7%
<i>vous</i>	2	7%
<i>ils</i>	0	0%
<i>elles</i>	0	0%
LEX	3	11%
<i>Total</i>	27	100%

The small number of 27 questions realized with inverted subjects, of course mainly with  $\langle tu_{2.sg.} \rangle$ , among 1036 analyzed subject-verb-combinations does seem to subscribe to Culbertson's thesis that these structures are "vanishingly rare" (Culbertson 2010: 100) in contemporary "European Colloquial French". Yet, they still do appear, even if this is only a weak argument against a potential affix status of these elements (cf. above, Section 2).

### 5.3 Graphical agglutination or fusion of preverbal clitic elements

Frequent agglutinative or even fusional spelling of preverbal clitic subjects could be an indicator of an ongoing linguistic change in contemporary French in a context of norm-free spelling such as in text messages, as they could indicate the speakers' unconscious conception of their actual grammatical status, which is otherwise hidden by the very conservative French orthography (cf. Meisenburg 1996).

A first study on the graphical realization of subject-verb agreement in the first 400 French text messages of our corpus (cf. Stark 2011) revealed that the overwhelming majority of cases are realized in standard orthography (about 90%).

A closer look at the realization of only the subjects in this sub-corpus shows the same tendency, as Table 4 demonstrates:

**Table 4.** Spelling of the 1036 subjects analyzed

Spelling of the subject	
Nonstandard	210
Standard	755
Near standard	71
<i>Total</i>	1036



210 out of 1036 subjects, i.e. 20,27%, are spelled in a way that is heavily deviant from standard French orthography. 71, i.e. 7%, are spelled in a ‘near-standard’ way and are less interesting for our discussion here (but see Dürscheid & Stark forthcoming for those and other examples), i.e. they lack e.g. apostrophes or diacritics, but respect all in all the standard morphology and spelling.

Out of the 210 nonstandard cases, 38 show a radical fusional spelling, using “letter-homophones” for the phonographic fusional representation of clitic subjects and finite verbs (<g> for <j’ai>, ‘I have’, both [ʒe], 15 *tokens*; <c> for <c’est>, ‘that is’, both [sɛ], 12 *tokens*; <c t> for <c’était>, ‘it was’, both [setE],<sup>15</sup> 3 *tokens*), like in the following example:

- (2) *Tcho l’yeti!J’rigole!;-)ca farte?c t super hier!mon voeux ne s’est pas encore réalisé...et toi?J’ai été voir tt les hanna sur facebook [...] et g retenu quelks [...]*

‘High Yeti! Just kidding!;-) Everything all right? It was great yesterday. My dream has not come true yet...and yours? I have looked at all the Hannas available on Facebook [...] and I have saved some [...]

More frequently, however, do we find cases of simple graphical vowel deletion in front of a verb form beginning with a vowel (“élision”), like in standard French with <je<sub>1.sg.</sub>>, representing phonographically the *allegro* forms of informal French clitic subjects:

- (3) *T’en as d’autres qui sont bien au moins? [...]*  
 ‘Do you have any others which are good at least?’

Very rare are occurrences (3 *tokens*) of radical phonographical spelling of fused preverbal clitics and/or verb forms, like <ché> for [ʃɛ] or [ʃe] (<je sais>, ‘I know’), or <chu> for [ʃy(i)] (<je suis>, ‘I am’) as shown in (4), and of phonographical spelling of fused preverbal clitic clusters, like in example (5) (<chte> for [ʃtə], <je te>, ‘I you’):

- (4) *Saludjan, je tapel en fin daprem, chu ala bourre, c le stress.bek*  
 ‘Hello, I will call you at the end of the afternoon, I am at work, it’s very stressful, kiss’

15. Note that verb forms like <c’était> are pronounced either with a closed or open [E] in the final syllable. The standard pronunciation of the letter <t> is [te], the standard pronunciation of <c’était> is [setɛ], but regional variation might be the reason why <t> can be used as a letter-homophone for the second syllable in verb forms like <c’était>. The notation [tE] indicates only the archiphoneme [E], leaving open the actual realization.

- (5) *Chte rejoins!*  
‘I join you!’

Additionally, only 5 out of 205 examples show similar cases of fusion of two preverbal clitics, and the 16 examples with 3 preverbal clitics do not attest similar fusional spelling tendencies, either.

#### 5.4 XP-cl-combinations in the corpus

There are 57 non-clitic subjects among our 1036 analyzed subjects (cf, Table 2, i.e. proper nouns, subjects with a lexical common noun, 2 x *tout*, 1 x *tout le monde*, 1 x *personne*, 1 x *quelqu’un*). Among these, we find only one clear case of subject-doubling:

- (6) Ouais *la soirée MacFlurry ça me plait!*  
‘Yes, I like that, the Mac Flurry evening!’

We find also 5 cases of ‘vocatives’ plus subject clitics in interrogative constructions, which cannot, however, be counted as clear doubling constructions:

- (7) Coucou *ma princesse, comment vas-tu?*  
‘Hello, my princess, how are you?’

Additionally, there are 4 cases of *moi je*, 2 cases of *toi tu*, 2 cases of *nous on*, and 1 case of *ça c’est* in our sub-corpus:

- (8) *Alor Ça c trobien!*  
‘Well that, this is too good!’

Thus, we cannot help saying that despite of the clearly informal character of the corpus, subject doubling is almost absent in our data. Here, we have to be careful about using this evidence as direct counter-evidence against the ‘agreement marker hypothesis’ (see below), given the special production conditions of text messages, which are always graphic in nature and demand a considerable typing effort at least in our corpus, set up before the massive arrival of smart-phones. Still, we think that obligatory structures in phonic French would manifest themselves more frequently in text messages, so that we remain sceptical about the alleged advanced grammaticalization of subject doubling in “European Colloquial French”.

#### 5.5 Subject ellipsis

There are 52 cases of subject ellipsis among our 1036 subject-verb<sub>fin</sub>-combinations, which concern mostly expletives (14 out of 33 occurrences; cf. the following Tables 5, 6 and 7):

Table 5. Ellipsis per morphological exponent

Person	Morphological Exponent	Ellipsis	%	Realized	%	Total
1SG	<i>je</i>	31	8%	366	92%	397
2SG	<i>tu</i>	3	2%	196	98%	199
3SG	<i>il</i>	3	11%	24	89%	27
Expletive	<i>il impers.</i>	14	42%	19	58%	33
	<i>elle</i>	0	0%	10	100%	10
	<i>ce</i>	0	0%	74	100%	74
	<i>ça</i>	0	0%	80	100%	80
1PL	<i>on</i>	1	1%	115	99%	116
	<i>nous</i>	0	0%	9	100%	9
2PL	<i>vous</i>	0	0%	18	100%	18
3PL	<i>ils</i>	0	0%	0	0%	0
	<i>elles</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
	LEX	0	0%	57	100%	57
	<i>qui</i>	0	0%	12	100%	12
	<i>nous on</i>	0	0%	2	100%	2
	<i>ça ce</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
Total		52	5%	984	95%	1036

Table 5 shows that  $\langle je_{1.Sg} \rangle$ ,  $\langle tu_{2.Sg} \rangle$  and  $\langle il_{3.Sg} \rangle$  are the most often elided clitic subjects, after impersonal  $\langle il_{3.Sg} \rangle$ , plus one occurrence of dropped  $\langle on_{3.Sg} \rangle$  with the meaning ‘we’. All other subjects are never dropped at all. Since by far the most subject ellipses concern impersonal  $\langle il \rangle$ , we cannot really consider this phenomenon a case of topic-drop, impersonal subjects never being topics (cf. Haegeman in preparation and Section 6).

Table 6. Subject ellipsis with expletives

	Ellipsis	%	Realized	%	Total
<i>il y a</i>	7	50%	7	50%	14
<i>il faut</i>	3	50%	3	50%	6
<i>il paraît</i>	1	100%	0	0%	1
<i>il fait</i>	2	50%	2	50%	4
<i>il risque</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
<i>il semble</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued)

<i>il manque</i>	1	50%	1	50%	2
<i>il reste</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
<i>il est</i>	0	0%	2	100%	2
<i>il pleut</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
Total	14	42%	19	58%	33

Table 6 indicates *il y a* and *il faut* as the structures with most frequently elided clitic subjects, whereas *il pleut*, with a weather verb, does not show subject ellipsis, as predicted by other studies. Of course, our absolute numbers in this section are very low, but the total absence of subject ellipsis of *il* with weather verbs is strong evidence for normal grammatical regularities characterising our like any other French data. This tendency becomes even clearer by an analysis comprising the whole French corpus as to ellipsis of expletive *il*.<sup>16</sup>

Table 7. Subject ellipsis with expletives – whole corpus (only present tense)

	Ellipsis	%	Realized	%	Total
<i>il y a</i>	45	54%	38	46%	83
<i>il faut</i>	61	55%	49	45%	110
<i>il paraît</i>	2	20%	8	80%	10
<i>il semble</i>	1	9%	10	91%	11
<i>il s'agit de</i>	1	25%	3	75%	4
<i>il pleut/neige</i>	0	0%	11	100%	11
Total	110	48%	119	52%	229

There is only one example in the whole French corpus with *il*-deletion and another preverbal object clitic, which is ungrammatical in French and should not be attested (there is no deletion in subordinate sentences found at all, not even in ungrammatical ones, cf. Di Meo 2011):

- (9) *T'as pensé à cerbère? Me semble que c'est le travail qui manquait [...].*  
 'Did you think of Cerbère? Seems to me as if it was the work missing [...]'

But as we checked the sociodemographic information about the author of this example, we found that it was a French L2 speaker, with English as his or her L1.

16. With *il s'agit de* percentually more prone than *il paraît* to subject ellipsis, but more rare in absolute numbers.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 General observations

The data presented in Section 5 were based on the analysis of 1036 subjects in the first 400 SMS of the Swiss corpus. Among these subjects, only 57 are non-clitical ones – this being a strong internal indicator for conceptually oral, informal communication, where pronominal subjects are highly preferred (cf. Stark 2011, see also Koch & Oesterreicher 2011 [1990]).

Not surprisingly (cf. Table 1), the most frequent subjects are in the 1st and 3rd person singular, a fact that corroborates the predictions of universal markedness theories (cf. Mayerthaler 1980). According to these and the informal character of most of the text messages, the most frequent morphological exponents are by far *je*, *tu*, *on* (cf. Table 2), which also underlines the highly dialogical character of text messages.

### 6.2 Status of clitic subjects in the corpus: Pronouns or agreement markers?

In Section 2, we shortly discussed four critical properties of French clitic subjects, inversion, agglutination or fusion, which might point to their potential affix status, subject doubling and ellipsis, all of which may help to decide about their actual status in contemporary French.

Our corpus analysis revealed occurrences of clitic subjects in inversion structures (cf. Table 3), but these are admittedly rare and also fully compatible with an affix status (cf. Nevis & Joseph 1992).

Agglutination phenomena of clitic subjects and other clitic elements between the subject and the finite verb are attested as well, but also relatively rare (cf. Table 4). The most frequent are graphical realizations according to standard French orthography (755) or close-to-standard spellings (71), which amount together to more than 80% of all occurrences. The most frequent deviant graphical variants are cases of simple vowel-letter omission, imitating the *allegro* realization of clitic subjects in informal speech (177 tokens). We only find three rather conventionalized graphical variants indicating fusion of the clitic subject and the following finite verb (<g>, <c>, <c t>), which, however, also occur rather rarely (30 tokens, cf. also Zimmermann 2009), 2 additional radical fusion phenomena, and we find only 6 cases of two preverbal clitics agglutinated graphically (out of 205 occurrences of two or more preverbal clitics altogether).

Of course, our data are graphical in nature and thus probably prone to follow the overall conservative tendencies in French spelling, especially when it comes to functional morphemes (cf. Meisenburg 1996 for French orthography in general

and Dürscheid & Stark forthcoming, Stark 2011 for more information about our corpus). However, text messages are contexts of rather ‘norm-free’ spelling showing several traces of attempts to ‘write how we speak’, and keeping this in mind, our findings either indicate that this tendency towards ‘phonetic spelling’ is much weaker than usually claimed in the new media research tradition (but seldom sustained by quantitative investigation, cf. e.g. Anis 2007), or that morphological fusion in the preverbal domain is much less common or grammaticalized in non-standard French than frequently claimed in the literature (against Darmesteter 1877; Schwarze 2001, and Culbertson 2010).

As for XP-cl-combinations in our corpus, we found only one clearly pragmatically motivated case (left-dislocation, cf. example (6) above), and additionally 4 times *moi je* (out of 366 occurrences of *je*), twice *toi tu* (out of 196 occurrences of *tu*), twice *nous on* (out of 9 occurrences of *nous*) and once *ça c’est* (out of 80 occurrences of *ça*). This is not really attesting an ongoing grammaticalization of subject doubling in (informal) French. It may be the graphical character of our corpus which, again, prevents people from subject doubling – yet, if this was already a grammatical feature of “European Colloquial French”, following Culbertson 2010, it should nevertheless be much more frequent in our data. So either subject doubling is a feature of *phonic* rather than *colloquial* French (for the crucial distinction between medium, i.e. graphical or phonic realization of messages, and the conception of messages as more or less informal see Koch & Oesterreicher 2011 [1990]), or it is not (yet) a grammatical feature of the latter at all. Please keep in mind that also in colloquial or informal French, sentences without subject doubling still are completely grammatical. In this context, it will be necessary to systematically include the factor of orthography and normative influence via school teaching into the analysis, in order to achieve a better understanding of graphical non-standard data like text messages.

Finally, subject ellipses are also rare in our corpus (8% of *je* and 2% of *tu*), except for expletives, where the already described syntactic regularities and the absence of subject ellipsis with weather verbs is confirmed by our data (cf. Section 2 and Tables 5 to 7). While cases of subject drop for the first and second person seem incompatible with Culbertson’s “matching hypothesis”, according to which only non-definite and non-accessible<sup>17</sup> clitic subjects are dropped, the drop of expletives is incompatible with the phenomenon of *topic drop*, as these cannot be topics for semantic reasons. Yet, the distribution of ellipsis with expletives favours Culbertson’s “matching hypothesis”, as the subject of weather verbs can be

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17. See Footnote 8.

considered an argument (situational) of the verb (cf. e.g. the remarks in Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995:288), contrary to expletives in impersonal constructions like *il faut* ('it is necessary') or *il paraît* ('it seems'). We possibly face here at least two different phenomena, and future research has to tackle down what exactly is going on with French subject ellipsis.

All in all, the empirical evidence for Culbertson's hypothesis about French clitic subjects as agreement markers is rather small in our corpus of text messages. Our clitic subjects show standard French characteristics, like full subjects, with quite a low percentage of graphical variation.

## 7. Conclusion: Text messages, language change and linguistic change

To sum up, we did not find much evidence in our corpus for an ongoing linguistic, structural ("evolutive") change, and we even found only a small amount of graphical variation and rarely any heavily deviant graphical variants. Moreover, we can hardly consider these as innovative variants in the sense of Andersen 2001b (cf. Darmesteter 1877; Schwarze 2001), as they only imitate what has already, for a long time, been discussed for colloquial or informal French.

When we ask ourselves about a possible language change in text messages, i.e. norm change, we also have to admit that our data do not permit to identify such a change. The majority of the structures analyzed by us are realized in standard orthography, and there are only a few graphical variants on their way of being lexicalized or conventionalized (such as ⟨g⟩ for ⟨j'ai⟩ or ⟨c⟩ for ⟨c'est⟩). There is only one case of graphical variation which might indicate an ongoing change as a potential case of *actualization*, i.e. a case of "observable manifestation of grammar innovations in speech" (Andersen 2001b: 225), namely the 'fusional' spelling of preverbal clitic clusters including the first person singular clitic subject *je*:

(10) *jte souhaite* (⟨je te souhaite⟩)  
'I wish you...'

(11) *jtm* (⟨je t'aime⟩)  
'I love you'

As ⟨je⟩ is the most frequent and thus the least marked morphological subject exponent in our corpus, these spellings might indicate its ongoing or even completed grammaticalization towards an agglutinative or fusional affix, following the argumentation in Andersen (2001a: 33f.). Compared to the phonetically similar sequence in *on se voit* ('we see each other'), where the letter ⟨e⟩ indicating

the schwa in [sə] could also be dropped but in fact never is in our corpus,<sup>18</sup> the agglutination of ⟨je⟩ is significantly more frequent.

Of course, we are dealing with an exclusively graphical corpus here, and the observed tendency may also be just reflecting a change in the writing norm of French in certain communicative contexts. And we always have to take into consideration one major argument in Culbertson 2010, i.e. the co-presence of at least two different grammars in many speakers' minds, the standard grammar and some "European Colloquial French", which might explain the relatively high numbers of standard orthographical variants, especially in our data, which always only indirectly reflect the speakers' knowledge and use of their native language.

As for our initial research question, i.e. how much insight can data like text messages give into linguistic change (in French), we can see that even in rather norm-free contexts of writing such as text messages, standard orthography is heavily present, so that the actual influence of the new media on the spelling and graphical representation of grammatical elements like clitic subjects in French has to be considered rather weak, at least for the moment.

Apart from some slight indication concerning agglutinative or fusional spellings of the first person singular clitic element ⟨je⟩, there is no real *language change* observable in our data and there are almost no indicators for an ongoing *linguistic change*, at least not in the kind of automatized grammatical phenomena (agreement, clitic subject, expletives) we have investigated in this pilot study on the morphosyntax of French text messages (cf. Stark 2011).

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18. It is of course dropped in phonic informal French.



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