

Variable *ne* in nineteenth-century French: corpus data and metalinguistic commentaries

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The non-occurrence of negative *ne* in contemporary spoken French has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. At least since the 1970s, corpus studies undertaken in different parts of the French-speaking world have provided fine-grained analyses of the distribution of *ne*. In particular, it has been shown that both linguistic and extralinguistic factors play a role in accounting for the distributional tendencies observed. By contrast, the historical evolution of this variable since the first documented instances of *ne* 'omission' in Early Modern French remains insufficiently understood. While according to Martineau & Mougeon 2003 the absence of negative *ne* remains a minor option before the latter half of the nineteenth century, Poplack & St-Amand 2007 claim that simple postverbal negations must have been common at a considerably earlier stage in the history of French.

This talk aims to shed some new light on the purported rise of *ne* during the nineteenth century. We will present data from a variety of text types, and offer an assessment of the evidential value of different types of sources. Our corpus study will then be complemented by an investigation of the treatment of negation by nineteenth-century French grammarians and other observers of language. In the third part of the talk, we will compare our findings for variable negative *ne* with the observed distributions and metalinguistic descriptions of optional non-negative *ne*, traditionally known as *ne explétif*.