



Subject inversion and information structure in Old Romance

Esther Rinke; University of Hamburg
erinke@uni-hamburg.de

Introduction

Point of departure

• In modern Romance -with the exception of modern French- subjects may remain in a low structural position which may have a focus/rhematic interpretation.

Question

• Did medieval French already differ from the other Romance languages with respect to postverbal subjects and their interpretation?

Remarks on Old French

• Old French has been analyzed as a V2-/null-subject-language (Adams 1987, Roberts 1993, Vance 1997). However, both properties have been questioned recently (Kaiser 2001, Sitaridou 2004).

Hypothesis

• Old French did not differ from the other Romance languages with respect to the syntax and interpretation of postverbal subjects.

Method

• Comparison of the syntax and interpretation of postverbal subjects in Old Portuguese and Old French.

Database

• **Old Portuguese:** 57 juridical documents (North and Central Portugal), period 1250-1350; 547 declarative main clauses
• **Old French:** Villehardouin chronicle; 13th century, 1008 main clauses; Sept Sages; 13th century, 513 main clauses

4. OFr and OP are null subject languages. Post verbal DP-subjects and null subjects are licensed in verb-initial main clauses (4a.-b.):

- 4a. e **pagarē** uossos ereos a rrēda q(ue) uos ouu(er)ades pagar
and pay your heir the rent that you have to pay
- b. et **rendi** chascuns son passage a ceuls qui leur
and gave everybody his toll to the ones who them
avoient presté
had lent
- c. & **mañfestam(os) & conozem(os)** q(ue) rezibem(os) de uos
and (we) declare & recognize that (we)received from you
por p(re)zu do sobred(i)to h(er)dam(en)tu
for the price of the aforementioned farm
dozentus & cinq(u)aenta s(oldo)s,...
twenty five Soldos
- d. Et **prirent** .I. parlement au chief dou mois a saisons pour
and take a meeting after this month in Soissons to
savoir qu'il porroient fere
know what they could do

	null subject clauses	verb-initial null subject clauses	%
Portuguese	279	111	39.7
OF/Sept Sages	160	67	41.8
OF/Villehardouin	291	79	27.1

Syntax of postverbal subjects in OFr and OP

1. Postverbal subjects appear to the right of short adverbs and negation (Pt. *sempre*, Fr. *bien, mie, pas*; la.-b.)

- 1a. & esta grana sobredjta **more senp(re) un nosso**
and (in) this aforementioned dairy farm lives always one our
frade por jur do mosteyro;
brother through the right of-the monastery
- b. Et ce **tesmoigne bien** josfroiz li mareschus de champagne
and this testifies well Josfroiz the marshal of Champagne

2. The postverbal subject of a transitive verb can be combined with an object. The canonical order of postverbal subject and object is VSO both in OP and OFr (2a.-b.).

- 2a. Porēde **aiades** uos e todos uosos sucessores as coyrelas das
therefore have you and all your successors the land of-the
d(i)ctas **vinhas** deste dia p(er)a todo sempre).
aforementioned vineyards from today forever and ever
- b. Lors **ot** li dus de venice et maint autre baron **grant travail**
So had the duke of Venice and many other lords much work
tote cele semaine
all this week

	Portuguese	% (of 67)	French	% (of 67)
VSO	8	11.9	16	23.9
VOS	0	0	3 (with idiomatic objects)	4.5

3. The postverbal subjects of unaccusative and passive verbs agree with the finite verb (and with the passive participle). No preverbal expletive subject pronoun is required.

- 3a. feyto **fohe** isto ñno Moest(eir)o de villarño #x dias
made was this in-the Monastery of Vilarinho 10 days
an(te) K(al)end(ā)s Nou(em)br(i)s.
before month november
- b. et **vindrent** tuit li huissier et les autres nēs
and came all the trailers and the other boats
qui estoient ariere...
which were behind
- c. et **furent** les lettres escrites...
and were the letters written ...

Interpretation of postverbal subjects in Old Romance

For the older stages of the languages, only indirect evidence is available. If the postverbal subject is rhematic/Focus, the following tendencies may be predicted:

5. In a rhematic/Focus position, pronominal subjects should be dispreferred. In both OFr and OP, postverbal subjects tend to be DPs rather than pronouns.

	OP	%	OF	%
postverbal DP-subjects	34	94.4	187	88.6
postverbal pronominal subjects	2	5.6	24	11.4
total	36	100	211	100

6. Indefinite subject DPs are excluded in topic-position. In OFr, indefinite subjects are more likely to appear postverbally than preverbally.

	total	%
indefinite subjects (Villehardouin)		
preverbal	7	21.9
postverbal	25	78.1
	32	100

Summary and Conclusions

- Postverbal DP-subjects occupy a low structural position in Old Portuguese and Old French. Syntactic tests, particularly the placement of short adverbs and negation, indicate that they remain in their base position in SpecvP. This is expected given that OP and OFr are null subject languages (cf. Barbosa 1995, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998).
- There is evidence that postverbal DP-subjects in Old Romance can be interpreted as rhema/Focus.
- Open questions concern the role of postverbal pronouns (enclitics on the finite verb?) and the scarceness of postverbal DP-subjects and null subjects in subordinate clauses.