

**Variable *ne* Omission in French Negation:
Reconstructing Change in Spoken Varieties**

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Contemporary spoken French is set apart from its written counterpart by a number of stochastic morphosyntactic properties. Among these, the preponderance of sentential negation without preverbal *ne* is particularly prominent, whereas bi-partite negation remains compulsory in written varieties. Recent investigations (cf. Martineau/Mougeon 2003) tend to view the frequent omission of *ne* in spoken usage as a relatively recent phenomenon, as sentential negations without *ne* are virtually non-existent in literary sources imitating informal speech and also in texts from semi-literate writers before the second half of the 19th century. The only major exception is the *Journal d'Héroard*, an extensive documentation of the first ten years of the future king Louis XIII (*1601), that includes numerous transcript-like passages of direct speech.

In our talk, we compare syntagmatic factors that favour the retention of *ne* in different corpora, comprising both adult and child speech, from *Héroard* up to contemporary spoken French. Notwithstanding considerable variation between speakers concerning the overall rate of *ne*-deletion, we find remarkable uniformity across time and generations in patterns of intra-speaker variation. We will discuss possible motivations for the observed patterns as well as the implications for sociohistorical linguistics, arguing for a more fine-grained picture of Jespersen's Cycle in French.