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Negative clitic *ne* is almost never pronounced in colloquial French, but lack of spell-out doesn't imply lack of covert existence: sometimes a dropped *ne* exhibits syntactical effects at spell-out.

In a widespread colloquial use, a phonological rule optionally reduplicates the initial liquid consonant that constitutes, after the schwa-drop, the third person singular accusative clitic, when it stays between two vowels in overt syntax:

- (1) ✓ Jel-l'aime.
Ih-him love.
'I love him.'

Crucially, this phonological rule isn't available in negative sentences:

- (2) * Jel-l'aime pas.
Ih-him love not.
'I don't love him.'

We take this to mean that *ne*, though not pronounced, is syntactically present—it may be the phonologically null 'NEG-operator' proposed by Haegeman 1995 under the strong hypothesis that the NEG-criterion is always satisfied at s-structure. The correct representation of (2) would thus be something like (3), with a clitic negative Boolean operator blocking the reduplication rule:

- (3) * Jel-¬-l'aime pas.
Ih-¬-him love not.

Consistently, the reduplication rule becomes available again when *ne* is phonologically realized, since it provides another vowel able to host the reduplicated consonant (though (4) is a rare form owing to the large extent of *ne*-drop in colloquial register):

- (4) ✓ Je nel-l'aime pas.
I neh-him love not.
'I don't love him.'

The existence of '¬' could also account for the variations shown in clitic ordering between negative and non-negative sentences.

In the Southeast of France, regional order of singular argumental clitics is dative-accusative (instead of standard order accusative-dative), as in (5a); the former is plausibly derived from the latter by an incorporation rule, as proposed for Italian by Laenzlinger (1993:253-254). Plural dative cannot incorporate in a non-negative sentence, as in (5b):

- (5) a. % Je lui le donne.
I to-him it-M give.
'I give it to him.'
b. * Je leur le donne.
I to-them it-M give.
'I give it to them.'

The problem could be of phonological nature. At the singular, no problem arises with [lɥil]; on the other hand, *[lœʀl] contains a sequence [ʀl] which is ungrammatical as a syllabic coda in French. Now, the negative clitic forces a resyllabification, so that [ʀ] becomes the coda of the first syllable, and [l] is included in the second one—either along with *ne* as [lœʀ nəl], or along with '¬' as [lœʀ lə]:

- (6) % Je leur {ne/ ¬} le donne pas.
I to-them {ne/ ¬} it give not.
'I don't give it to them.'

The existence of '¬' could also account for the possibility of proclisis in negated imperatives as in (7b) (vs. its impossibility in non-negated imperatives as in (7a)), in a manner that remains to be understood:

- (7) a. * Le fais!
It do!
'Do it!'
b. ✓ ¬ Le fais pas!
¬ It do not!
'Don't do it!'

References

- Haegeman, L. (1995) *The Syntax of Negation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Laenzlinger, C. (1993) "A syntactic view of Romance pronominal sequences", *Probus* 5:3, 242-270.