1.

Yves-Ferdinand Bouvier - University of Geneva
Some audible effects of a silent operator

Yvesferdi@wanadoo.fr

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 [l(l] ];
on the other hand, *[lœ{l [ on contains a sequence [xl] which is ungrammatical as a syllabic coda
in French. Now, the negative clitic forces a resyllabification, so that [ xl becomes the coda
of the first syllable, and [l] is included in the second one—either along with *ne as [Iœ[nl], or
along with ‘¬’ as [lœ{l]:

(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
242-270.