The French Pattern of Morphosyntactic Variation: a Case of a Diglossia

After an introduction of what I call 'Morphosyntactic Variation', I will deal with two well-known points of variation in French. The first concerns the sentencial negation, the so-called 'optionality of ne'. I will show that the heuristics of this optionality is not optimal. The version with NE is a verb-negation, therefore its sentencial properties, whereas the version without NE is a constituent-negation, where its sentencial properties come from the fact that it happens to have scope on the verb. Some cases where the version with NE is not a possible option to the version without NE strongly suggest that the two versions are better described independently from each other.

The second point deals with some alternate structures to SVO: left- and right-dislocation, and have-clefts. Recalling Lambrecht's work on Information Structure, in general and more specifically in French, I will have a look at the pragmatic functions of these constructions. Because the discussed constructions, like the negation without NE, are non-normative, I will wish to describe them as not minimally derivable from SVO clauses.

These observations lead to the hypothesis of two independently internalised varieties of French for the speakers who produce this variation, recalling Ferguson's concept of Diglossia. If what I call Late Classical French and Demotic French are really independent, the diglossic speakers have to show a particular pattern of variation: either they activate LCF, or DF, but not both at a time.

This prediction is then checked on a corpus where a diglossic speaker produces the discussed variations, but never mixes the late classical and the demotic variants within a clause.