Clitic climbing in French is present, but restricted

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Background: In French infinitive constructions, the second (embedded) verb can have its own arguments; see, for example, the indirect object *à Pierre* in (1):

(1) *Je <u>dois parler</u> à Pierre*.
'I <u>must talk</u> **to Peter**.'

Whenever arguments of the second verb are expressed by nouns, they are placed after this second verb, and when they are expressed by pronouns (pronominal clitics), they take a different position – between the two verbs, as in (2):

(2) *Je <u>dois</u> te <u>parler</u>.*
'I <u>must talk</u> **to you**.'

However, this rule, though it seems rather strict, may be sometimes violated – the pronominal argument can occupy another position, before the matrix verb, as in (3):

(3) *Oui je te <u>dois parler</u> ! Comment vas-tu déjà ?*
'Yeah, I <u>must talk</u> **to you**! How is it going now?' [http://aminoapps.com/p/l2x500]

This phenomenon is known under the term *clitic climbing*; it is also attested in other Romance languages, such as Spanish and Italian (see, for example, [González-López 2008] for Spanish and [Napoli 1981] for Italian). However, in the literature which analyzes clitic climbing in these languages, it is usually claimed that clitic climbing does not exist in French.

The present study: In my work, I try to contest the statement given above by showing that clitic climbing exists in French, though it is more restricted there than in other Romance languages. I identify some of the factors (lexical, semantic, and syntactic) which are likely to decrease its probability in French, but seem rather irrelevant for other Romance languages (I mostly use the Spanish data presented in [González-López 2008] to draw the comparison, but sometimes the examples from Italian are provided).

I use the corpus [Araneum Francogallicum III Minus] for my study on French, though some elicitation has also been carried out: I have asked two native speakers of French to evaluate sentences with and without clitic climbing, and I use their judgments to complement the results that were obtained through the corpus study. The exact statistical data that were observed in the corpus will be presented during the talk and omitted here for the sake of brevity.

The main results: First of all, it was discovered that the clitic climbing in French is observed regularly only with six most frequent matrix verbs – *pouvoir* 'can', *devoir* 'must', *vouloir* 'want', *aller* 'go', *venir* 'come', *falloir* 'be necessary to' (for example, in (3) the verb *devoir* was used). In comparison, a list of the Spanish verbs that allow clitic climbing includes at least seventeen items, as presented in [González-López 2008: 148]. In addition, the semantics of such matrix verbs is more restricted in French as compared to Spanish: in French, all the verbs that allow clitics to climb through them are either modal predicates, or propositional attitude predicates, or desiderative predicates (in terms of [Noonan 2007]), whereas in Spanish they may also be, for example, achievement predicates (such as *tratar de* 'to try to') or aspectuals (such as *dejar de* 'to stop') [González-López 2008: 148].

Secondly, in French, clitic climbing is rarer with matrix verbs that host an infinitive clause using a preposition – for example, the clitic climbing was not attested in the corpus with one of the most frequent matrix verbs that make use of prepositions, *venir de* 'to just accomplish something'. In contrast, in Spanish clitics can easily climb through the prepositions – see, for example, (4), where the clitic *las* bypasses the preposition *de*:

(4) *Luís **las** trató de comer.*
    'Luis tried to eat **them**.' [an example from González-López 2008: 173]

Thirdly, the clitics are not equally well able to climb in French – only the clitics *y* and *en*, which introduce inanimate indirect and oblique objects, can climb without making the sentence rather ungrammatical (as was observed on the elicitation data), and in corpus clitic climbing is also found most frequently with these two clitics. Interestingly enough, it was also mentioned in [Kayne 2000: 65] that these two clitics are the only clitics that can climb in French. On the contrary, I did not find in the literature any evidence suggesting that clitic climbing in other Romance languages may also be restricted to only some of the pronominal clitics, and the examples in [González-López 2008] illustrate its occurrence with many different pronouns, such as, for instance, *las* in (4), which introduces a direct object.

Fourthly, clitic climbing in French is less likely to happen in some syntactic contexts – for example, with negation, or in the complex structures where the matrix predicate consists of more than one word (that is, it comprises an auxiliary verb and a lexical verb itself). In contrast, in Spanish clitics can climb through the negation marker, as illustrated by (5), where the clitic *la* climbs through the negation marker *no*. A comparable French example (6) was evaluated by a French native speaker as only marginally acceptable:

(5) ***La$_i$** quiere **no** comer (la tarta$_i$).*
    '(S)he wants to **not** eat **it** (the cake).' [an example from González-López 2008: 229]

(6) *Mais je **ne le** veux **pas** acheter.*
    'But I do **not** want to buy **it**.'

As to the complex structures, an example where a clitic would climb through a lexical verb and an auxiliary comes from Italian – see (7), where the clitic *lo*, the direct object of the verb *trovare*, climbs through three lexical verbs and an auxiliary verb. A comparable, though even more simple, French example (8) was considered unacceptable by a French native speaker:

(7) ***Lo** sarei voluto poter andare a trovare.*
    'I would have wanted to be able to go and visit **him**.' [an example from Cardinaletti, Shlonsky 2004]

(8) *Je **l'**ai voulu réveiller.*
    'I wanted to wake **him/her** up.'

Conclusions and further research: To summarize, clitic climbing in French, though repeatedly observed in corpora and sometimes judged as grammatical by the speakers, is strongly restricted: not all pronominal clitics can climb equally well, and only few matrix verbs allow clitics to climb through them; in addition, clitic climbing in French is unexpected if the negation markers are present, or if a predicate is expressed by a complex form (these two restrictions are similar in that in both structures there is one more word added between the clitic and the verb that hosts it). These limitations seem to not hold in other Romance languages, such as Spanish and Italian. This suggests that the French clitic climbing is somewhat special and does not work the same way as in other languages, so it needs to be investigated further.

In my study, I have mostly been focusing on French, and conducting a corpus study as well as elicitation only on the French data; however, a more systematic comparison of Romance languages needs to be carried out. For example, the factor of negation, which impedes clitic climbing in French but does not do so in Spanish, is, according to [González-López 2008: 229], claimed by many authors to also restrict clitic climbing in Italian. This allows us to suggest that the Romance languages each have their own set of factors restricting clitic climbing. This hypothesis needs to be testified in the future research, and the exact factors that restrict clitic climbing need to be identified for each of the Romance languages separately.

Corpora

Araneum Francogallicum III Minus – Annotated comparable web corpus (French). URL: http://aranea.juls.savba.sk/aranea_about/_francogallicum.html

Literature

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