

# The old French pronoun subject and the problem of stress

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## THE OLD FRENCH PRONOUN SUBJECTS AND THE PROBLEM OF STRESS<sup>1</sup>

In their discussion of the evolution of the Old French personal pronouns, most scholars distinguish the stressed and unstressed developments not only of the object pronouns, but also of the pronoun subjects<sup>2</sup>. In fact, however, the presentation of this difference in tabular form, which most of them favour, is extremely wasteful of space in so far as it involves listing under different headings forms which are identical to each other except in one case, that of the 1st person singular<sup>3</sup>: Old French *gié* is generally presented as the « stressed » development, *jo* (or *je*) as the « unstressed » one. It has always seemed to me that while one can easily understand how the different syntactical uses of the object pronouns led to divergent developments, it is far from self-evident that there should have been a similar differentiation of the forms of the pronoun subject. The latter, it would seem, were primarily emphatic (i. e. stressed) forms. It is perhaps unwise to state categorically, as did the late Walther von Wartburg<sup>4</sup>, that the Old French pronoun subjects were always stressed. It is perhaps largely a matter of

1. I am grateful to my London colleagues, M. F. Lyons and R. C. Johnston, for their helpful comments on the first draft of this paper. My errors of course remain my own.

2. Cf. F. Brunot and C. Bruneau, *Précis de grammaire historique de la langue française*, 3rd ed., Paris, 1949, p. 266-268, § 396; A. Ewert, *The French Language*, 2nd ed., London, 1943, p. 156 f, § 237-38; J. Fox and R. Wood, *A Concise History of the French Language*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1970, p. 64 f; K. Nyrop, *Grammaire historique de la langue française*, vol. II, Copenhagen, 1903, p. 368 f, § 524-25; M. K. Pope, *From Latin to modern French*, 2nd ed., Manchester, 1952, p. 320 ff, § 827-834; M. Regula, *Historische Grammatik des Französischen*, vol. II, Heidelberg, 1956, p. 66 f, § 44; Schwan-Behrens, *Grammaire de l'ancien français*, 2nd ed., Leipzig, 1913, p. 187, § 321-322.

3. It is true that a form *te* appears occasionally in Old French texts in place of *tu* (cf. K. Nyrop, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 371, § 526), presumably on the analogy of *je* — but it is by no means obvious that it should be classed as an atonic form, as Nyrop suggests.

4. Cf. *Évolution et structure de la langue française*, 6th ed., Bern, 1962, p. 130.

wording. Professor von Wartburg himself indicated<sup>1</sup> that the pronoun subject was not used solely for emphasis : for instance, it tended (in affirmative sentences at least) to be used to prevent the verb from appearing in initial position in the sentence or clause. In other words, the use of the pronouns was in such cases determined by little-understood rhythmic factors. However, two points need to be made. Firstly, the fact that the pronouns were sometimes used for rhythmic reasons does not prove that they were completely unstressed. The initial position is not normally atonic : truly weak forms such as unstressed pronoun objects were rarely allowed to open a sentence<sup>2</sup>. The second point is that although what Professor Glanville Price says<sup>3</sup> about the « un-emphatic » use of subject-pronouns in Old French may be correct, this does not really prove anything about usage in the early pre-literary period during which the main differentiations between stressed and unstressed forms of the possessives and of the pronoun object took place<sup>4</sup>. If there had been any significant differentiation of pronoun subjects, one would have expected it to manifest itself in a more dramatic way. Why (for instance) was there no overt differentiation of, say, the form *ele*, when the object form deriving from *illam* developed to *ele* (stressed) and to *la* (unstressed) ? Obviously, the development of *illa* as well as *illam* to *la* would have created unacceptable ambiguity in a system like that of Old French, but the complete absence of any kind of differentiation of the 3rd person forms is surely not without significance.

There is another puzzling aspect of the development of the pronoun subjects — the complete absence, even dialectally, of the forms *\*neus* and *\*veus* which scholars have generally expected to develop from Lat. *nos* and *vos*, when stressed, in the course of the 12th century. None of the suggested explanations are entirely satisfactory. There were in this case certainly unstressed forms — those of the object pronoun — but there is no overriding reason why analogy with this unstressed form should have prevented further development. Various scholars attribute the phenomenon to proclitic use of one type or another<sup>5</sup>, but it is again not clear why analogy with a pro-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 131 and *Problems and Methods in Linguistics*, Oxford, 1969, p. 65.

2. Cf. L. Foulet, *Petite syntaxe de l'ancien français*, 3rd ed., Paris, 1930, p. 115 ff, § 162 ff.

3. Cf. *The French Language : Past and Present*, London, 1971, p. 144 ff.

4. There was certainly weakening of the pronoun subjects, whence their reinforcement, starting from the 12th century, by the forms of the stressed object pronoun, but this is surely to be seen as a much later phenomenon.

5. Cf. K. Nyrop, *op. cit.*, vol. I, Copenhagen, 1914, p. 199, 182, E. Bourciez,

clitic variant should have completely inhibited the alleged « regular » development. Others simply note that the expected diphthongization did not occur <sup>1</sup>.

Before returning to the problem posed by the *nous* and *vous* forms, it appears appropriate to discuss the one apparently clear-cut example of formal differentiation of the pronoun subject, that affecting the first person singular. It is clear that there was a weakening of *jo* ([dʒo]) to *je* ([dʒə]) in Old French, and that this was due to lack of stress. This was, however, a relatively late phenomenon, bound up with the gradual extension of pronoun subject use. What is by no means equally clear is that the relationship between Old Fr. *gié* and *jo* was that of stressed and unstressed forms. One thing that stands out is the actual rarity of the form *gié* in Old French texts, where it occurs almost exclusively in rhymes. While *gié* is itself clearly an emphatic form, there is no reason to believe that *jo*, which occurs far more frequently, did not also represent originally a « stressed » development <sup>2</sup>. It is certainly often used — as G. Price shows <sup>3</sup> — in contexts where it is clearly emphatic, and in most other contexts, it *could* be emphatic. Price agrees <sup>4</sup> in believing that there is no real reason for classing *gié* and *jo* in the traditional way as « stressed » and « unstressed » developments of Lat. *ego*. If this is true, the formal distinction between « stressed » and « unstressed » forms, already slight, vanishes completely, at least so far as the early Old French pronouns are concerned.

Phonetically, the [ie] diphthong of *gié* derives from the diphthongization

*Précis de phonétique française*, 9th ed., p. 76, § 72, IV, E. Ewert, *op. cit.*, p. 155, 237, P. Fouché, *Phonétique historique du français*, Vol. II, p. 163 etc. A variant of this theory is put forward by W. D. Elcock (*The Romance Language*, London, 1960, p. 80) who attributes the development of *nos* and *vos* to use in combination with an element like *altre* < *altri* (cf. Span. *nosotros*, Cat. *nosaltres*). This is not impossible, but there is nothing about Gallo-Romance usage in the literary period to suggest that the combination of *nos* and *vos* with such an element was ever regular enough to prevent the development of a « stressed » form of the pronouns. One should also have expected the development of a stressed form of the pronoun object used after a preposition (cf. combinations like *pour moi*, *avec toi*, etc.).

1. Cf. H. Lausberg, *Romanische Sprachwissenschaft*, vol. III, Berlin, 1962, p. 106, § 714.

2. The form *jou* frequent in Picard texts was clearly a « stressed » development deriving from \**eó*.

3. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 144, § 11.4, with examples such as *e jo e vos i irum* (*Roland*), *tu es trop tendre e il trop dur* (*Mystère d'Adam*), etc.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 145, § 11.5.1.

of V. Lat.  $\epsilon$  — which indicates the presence of normal stress. The development of the word is nevertheless not regular : initial [dʒ] would appear to have arisen as the result of a cross between a form similar to the Occitan *ieu/eu* (< Lat. \**éō*) and the so-called unstressed form *jō* ([dʒo]) deriving, like Span. *yo*, from a V. Lat. \**eó*. That *jō* should have been classed as the « unstressed » development is probably due to the fact that the *ie* diphthong of *gié* represents a « stressed » development, and also, perhaps, to a certain parallelism between the divergent developments of *ego* and those of possessives such as *meum*, with their opposition between the diphthongization of the stressed vowel and its slurring. The weakness of this kind of reasoning is clear. It does not follow that because *gié* was a « stressed » form, *jō* was therefore not one : is there, for example, any sense in arguing that Span. *yo* represented an « unstressed » development ? The development of \**eo* to \**eó* is in line with a V. Lat. tendency to reduce front vowels to yod when they were in hiatus with another vowel (cf. the treatment of *iam* > O. Fr. *ja*, Span. *ya*). In the other Romance languages, the form of the 1st person pronoun singular is based on a reduced form \**éō* retaining the stress on the first vowel : the *langue d'oil* is the only language which preserved traces of both developments in the shape of *gié* < \**éō* and of *jō* < \**eó*. The presence of derivatives of \**eó* in two separate areas of Romance suggests, as W. D. Elcock states, that « *eó* was a possibility already inherent in Vulgar Latin <sup>1</sup>. » H. Lausberg suggests that two forms may have developed through differences in the stress-patterns within the sentence or group (e. g. \**io vidio* « I see » but \**ió llu vidio* « I see him ») <sup>2</sup>. Of the two variants thus produced, one was everywhere generalized in the pre-literary period, except in France. The point to be retained is, however, that neither can really be classed as the « unstressed » development of *ego*.

This brings us back to the problem of *nous/vous* and the absence of the alleged « stressed » developments. If the pronoun subjects were, as argued earlier, forms which were never really « unstressed » forms during the formative centuries, and if we accept the existing theories about French phonology, then some explanation of the non-appearance of \**neus* and \**veus* is clearly necessary. It is not easy to put forward any one explanation and be sure that it is correct, if only because we are not sure what precisely are the Old French data. Since the scribal traditions of Old French did not differen-

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

2. *Op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 104, note.

tiate clearly the sounds [o], [ou] and [u], we are not sure whether there were differences between the « stressed » and « unstressed » developments of the pronouns <sup>1</sup>, and if so, precisely what they were — except in so far as they did not include \**neus* and \**veus*. The only other source of information about phonetic forms, rhyme, does not seem to help very much, and I have certainly not been able to glean from it whether or not there were diphthongized forms [nous] and [vous]. According to generally-accepted theories about the development of sounds in French, the regular development of *nos* and *vos* would have been eventually to [\*nœs] and [\*vœs]. Let us therefore first reconsider the question within this frame of reference. As we have seen, most scholars attribute the irregularity of the development to proclitic use (in other words, to lack of stress) and/or to analogy with the « unstressed » development. The difficulty about these explanations is that they seem to exaggerate the lack of stress of pronoun subjects and that they do not really explain why the « unstressed » development should have dominated to such an extent that it completely prevented the « stressed » form from appearing. Pierre Fouché, for instance <sup>2</sup>, argues that there was no diphthongization because *nos* and *vos* had lost their stress : it seems gratuitous to assume that they were unstressed forms by the 8th century (when the diphthongization of Gallo-Romance [o] took place), and the analogical influence of this form on clearly stressed ones, such as the post-prepositional object form, becomes all the more mysterious <sup>3</sup>. Similar objections apply, but much less forcibly, if we assume that there was diphthongization of the vowel to [ou] in stressed position, but that this diphthong did not undergo the further stages of differentiation to [œ], as it generally did. By the time these changes began in the second half of the 12th century, the pronoun subject was already much less of a stressed form : this is borne out to the extent that the stressed form of the object pronoun is already making its appearance as a subject form, in combination with the original subject (*moi, je..., lui, il*, etc.). This of course raises the question why this stressed form at least should not have differentiated further to \**næs* and \**væs*, assuming that this was the regular development. The answer is that it cannot be accounted

1. Jersey-French, for instance, has three forms deriving from *vos*, i. e. [u], [vou] and [vu], the first of which is the « unstressed » subject form, the second the pronoun object form ([u vou lave:] = Fr. *vous vous lavez*), and the third the « stressed » one (cf. [pu vu] = *pour vous*).

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

for except in terms of analogical influences such as those which other scholars have invoked. What one can say in favour of this particular variant of the theory is that whatever the position may have been in the pre-literary and early literary period, the trend in 12th-century Old French was towards greater uniformity within the paradigms of the personal pronoun : cf. the tendency to generalise [lœr] and [lïi] (though these were stressed forms, not unstressed ones). We may also note with Fouché, that *nos* and *vos* differ from the other pronouns in that they were identical to the pronoun object forms, and that this may have played a role. If one assumes that [ou] did not differentiate to [œ], the diphthong would reduce in due course to [u], and merge with the « unstressed » form. This possible explanation of the non-appearance of \**næs* and \**væs* seems to me somewhat more plausible than those given in the past in that it focusses attention not on the pre-literary period, but on a comparatively late one when pronoun subjects were certainly losing their stress.

It would be even more convincing if one could show that the absence of diphthongization postulated by Fouché and others could be reconciled with acceptance of the fact that *nos* and *vos* were primarily used as stressed forms during the formative period. In this connection, we may note that there are also a number of inter-related special factors which could have played a role, and which indeed may individually or collectively provide the key to the mystery. These are :

- (i) Word-frequency. Pronouns are normally words with a high frequency of occurrence, and such words often have an irregular development ;
- (ii) Formal brevity. *Nos* and *vos* were monosyllabic, and the development of monosyllables also tends to be irregular ; and
- (iii) Syllabic structure. *Nos* and *vos* were not only monosyllabic, but contained a vowel followed by a consonant in the same syllable.

There is little to be said about the effects of word-frequency on formal development other than that it has clearly played a role in determining phonetic development, usually through the slurring of very high frequency words. It is of course open to question whether pronoun subjects were high frequency words in Vulgar Latin or Gallo-Romance : Professor Johnston <sup>1</sup>, on the basis of his reading of Late Latin (5th-7th century) texts, doubts whether they were. If this is true, frequency is not a factor to be reckoned with in the early development of the pronouns — although it obviously

1. In his comments on the original version of this paper.



proves nothing about the effects of word-frequency at a later period, say the 12th century. We should also note that if the subject-pronouns were relatively infrequently used during the Dark Ages, it is difficult to see why « unstressed » variants (such as *nous* and *vous* are supposed to be based on) should have emerged.

Probably more important is the tendency for monosyllabic words to develop in irregular ways. In Gallo-Romance, for instance, the retention into Old French of the final nasal consonant of Latin words is restricted to forms such as *rien*, *non* and the possessives *mien/mon*, *tuen/ton*, etc. <sup>1</sup>. The vowel-development of many monosyllabic Latin or Old French words is also untypical. It is usual to explain the retention of *a* in *à* < *ad*, *là* < *illac*, *la* < *illām*, *ma* < *\*ma*, *ta* < *\*ta*, etc., and in certain verb forms (*as*, *a* < *\*as*, *\*at*, *va* and *vas* < *vade/vadit* and *vadis*) in terms of their proclitic use <sup>2</sup>. This is reasonably convincing in the case of the first series, less so in the second : while both *avoir* and *aller* in their function as auxiliaries or semi-auxiliaries were used proclitically, it is difficult to see why the treatment of *a/va* in contexts like *il l'a* or *il y va* should have conformed to the same pattern. Similar doubts arise in cases involving [o] — notably our *nos/vos* forms, but also the interrogative *où* < *ūbi*, which latter may well have been used proclitically in certain contexts, but hardly in all <sup>3</sup>. The retention of the final nasal in the cases referred to above can perhaps be explained in terms of the conscious or unconscious attempt to preserve the identity of functionally important monosyllabic words by resisting « normal » changes.

Finally, there is the problem posed by the diphthongization of tonic vowels in the closed syllables of certain monosyllables. I have no doubt that some of the examples often cited, *mĕl* > *miel*, *fĕl* > *fiel*, *cōr* > O. Fr. *cuer* and *sal* > *sel*, *ab hoc* > O. Fr. *avuec* (and related O. Fr. forms like *poruec* and *sinuec*) are not very convincing. P. Fouché maintains <sup>4</sup> that given the development of *trēs*, *\*dos*, and *trans*, it is not necessary to postulate for Old

1. But cf. also the developments *iam* > O. Fr. *ja*, *quem* > *que*.

2. Another example of *a* not undergoing the change to *e* is *esta* < Lat. *stat*. In this, as in a number of the other examples quoted, *a* was probably still in a closed syllable when tonic free *a* was modified to *e*.

3. A more convincing example of a proclitically-used word is *pour* (< *pro*, V. Lat. *\*por*). We should also note, regarding the development of *ūbi* > *où*, that it is by no means clear that the regular development of Latin *ū* in Gallo-Romance was to *o* > *ou* > *eü* > *œ* : cf. C. A. Robson, « Literary Language, Spoken Dialect, and the Phonological Problem in Old French », *Trans. Philol. Soc.*, 1955, p. 167, note 1.

4. *Phonétique historique du français*, vol. II, Paris, 1958, p. 236.



Fr. the existence of V. Lat. forms like \**mele*, \**fele*, \**core* and \**sale*, in spite of the existence of Ital. *miele*, *fiela*, *cuore*, or Rum. *miere*, *fiere* and *sare*. It is true that the hypothesis is not essential, but there are good reasons for accepting it. The fact that forms with a final vowel have survived in two widely-separated areas suggests a wide distribution in V. Latin; more convincing still, perhaps, is the fact that imparisyllabic words other than those referring to humans were eliminated in V. Latin, to judge from the development of words like *leo*, *pes*, *dens*, *mons*, *sanguis*, etc. It is possible that *rien* < *rem* also derives from a lengthened V. Latin form — cf. the development of Lat. *spem* > Old Ital. *speme*, *spene*. The development of words other than nouns does not appear to have involved the addition of final vowels to any significant extent (but cf. the development of *quem* > Roum. *cine* and Sard. (Campidanian) *kini*)<sup>1</sup>, presumably because the nouns affected were mainly imparisyllabics which were rendered parisyllabic by the addition of a final vowel. Old Fr. *avuec* (Fr. *avec*) and related elements like *poruec* and *sinuec*, are generally derived, not from preposition + *hoc*, but from preposition + a reinforced form \**hoco*, considered to be more characteristic of the ablative case<sup>2</sup>. The reason for this conclusion is of course the retention of the final consonant (cf. the development of *ecce hoc* > Old Fr. *iço/ço*, later *ce*). It is more difficult to explain the development of such forms as *trois* < *tres*, *très* < *tra(n)s* and (sporadically) *ies* < *es* without accepting something that seems to run counter to the whole pattern of phonetic development in Gallo-Romance — i. e. the diphthongization of tonic blocked vowels unaffected by any special factor such as palatal influences. It is possible, as Fouché and others have maintained<sup>3</sup> that the monosyllabic form was sufficient to ensure the articulation of a long vowel, and therefore of a vowel which would undergo segmentation and diphthongization where appropriate. One hesitates, however, to accept this explanation unless it is backed up by very strong evidence, since after the change to a qualitative system, vowel length

1. Cf. W. Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed., 1935, No. 6953,2 (and No. 8142 for Old Ital. *speme*).

2. This seems the most plausible explanation (cf. Lausberg, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 189). It is not very convincing to attribute the retention of [k] in *avec* to its stressed position in the sentence, as does M. K. Pope (*op. cit.*, p. 143, § 357), with the fall of the consonant in *ce* < *ecce hoc* being attributed to its unstressed use. Fouché (*op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 236) postulates as the source of *avuec*, instead of a form in final -o, a reinforced \**hoque*. This is presumably intended to explain the presence of Old Fr. variants such as *avueque*, *avueques*, but these are better explained in terms of the analogy with *onque/onques* < *umquam*.

3. Cf. Fouché, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 235.

in Vulgar Latin appears to have been recast purely on the basis of syllabic structure, with long vowels in open syllables. As we have seen, it seems very probable that the nouns involved were not monosyllabic in the Vulgar Latin of Gaul, and their stressed vowel therefore not in a closed syllable. This still leaves a number of cases of varying degrees of complexity to be considered. So far as the development of the word *deux* is concerned, Fouché's postulation of a source *\*dos* is somewhat gratuitous : Pope and others derive from the Latin *duos*<sup>1</sup>. The development of *tra(n)s* > *très*, on the other hand, is extremely puzzling, since it derives from a form which was genuinely proclitic in its use — much more so than *nous*, *vous* and many of the other monosyllabic words whose « irregular » evolution is explained in terms of such a use (*vide supra*, p. 378) : the presence of *tre(s)-* as the only form of the verb-prefix (cf. Old Fr. *trespasser*, *trespercier*, *trestorner*, etc.) is particularly surprising<sup>2</sup>. One is therefore entitled to query whether the Gallo-Roman development of *trans* has not been affected by contamination of some kind. The development of *trois* and of *ies* can also tentatively be ascribed to outside influences, such as analogy with Old Fr. *treie* < *trīa* and with forms such as *iers* < *ēris*, where diphthongization was perfectly regular. In any case, the forms of the verb *être* and its cognates in the other Romance languages are riddled with anomalies, and it is dangerous to base phonetic rules on examples drawn from its history. The case against accepting as a feature of Gallo-Romance phonology the diphthongization of blocked vowels in monosyllabic words is thus hardly conclusive, but it is nevertheless reasonably strong, especially since it enables us to avoid postulating what is after all a somewhat anomalous development. If we accept this, *nous* and *vous* are explained as forms which did not undergo diphthongization of the tonic vowel because that vowel was in a closed syllable. This is however, as we have seen, only one of several factors which could account for the non-appearance of *\*neus* and *\*veus*, and which singly or in combination

1. Cf. Pope, *op. cit.*, p. 113, § 254.

2. R. Grandsaignes d'Hauterive in his *Dictionnaire d'ancien français*, Paris, 1947, lists such forms as compounds of *tres* and the verb (*op. cit.*, p. 570 f). Since combinations of *trans* + verb were common in Latin, this raises the question of why such forms should not have existed in Gallo-Romance before the modification of tonic free *a* > *e*, in which case the prefix would not have undergone the change, since it did not bear the main stress. A development of this type is found in words such as *traverser*, *travers*, *traversin*, etc., but it is not regular either, in so far as the *s* was eliminated early : the etymological dictionaries derive from forms such as *\*traversare*, *\*traversus*, etc.

absolve us from any need to regard *nous* and *vous* as « unstressed » developments of the personal pronouns which in some mysterious way completely prevented the appearance of the « stressed » forms which we might have expected to predominate. In my opinion, *nous* and *vous* do not represent an « unstressed » development : indeed, the main purpose of this note has been to show that the distinction made between « stressed » and « unstressed » developments of the pronoun subjects was not a significant one, at least in the early, pre-literary, period. Here we have been led astray by an apparent parallel with pronoun object forms and possessive forms, a parallel which is not really justified by the facts.

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