NULL SUBJECTS IN OLD FRENCH

5.0. INTRODUCTION: OLD FRENCH AND THE ROMANCE NULL SUBJECT LANGUAGES

Whereas our discussion of V2 in OFr in previous chapters required extensive comparison with the modern Germanic languages, the topic of the present chapter invites comparison primarily with the modern Romance languages. Just as German and Dutch were the first V2 languages to be studied in detail in the generative framework, Spanish and Italian were the first null subject languages to receive widespread attention from generativists (cf. e.g. Perlmutter (1971), Taraldsen (1978), Burzio (1981, 1986), Rizzi (1982)). In these languages, it appears that the presence of six distinct endings on the verb forms for the three singular and three plural persons substitutes entirely for the subject pronoun, much as in their parent language, Latin. If a pronoun appears, it receives a marked interpretation: it is usually stressed or emphatic in some way.

OFr presents a system that differs significantly from that of Spanish and Italian. In Spanish and Italian, the non-expression of the subject pronoun is the norm, and in many instances a null subject is the only pronoun that can convey the intended referential properties. An overt subject pronoun is not required unless it is needed to express emphasis or contrast.1 In Old French, on the other hand, the reverse situation obtains: it is never obligatory to use a null pronoun (except for certain discourse purposes discussed in section 5.4) and in some syntactic configurations an overt pronoun must be used. The following examples demonstrate these null subject phenomena in Romance.

(1) Italian:

a. Il professore, ha parlato dopo che pro, è arrivato.  
the professor has spoken after that pro is arrived

b. *Il professore, ha parlato dopo che lui, è arrivato.  
the professor has spoken after that he is arrived

'The professor spoke after he arrived.'

(Vanelli, Renzi, and Benincà (1985) p. 164)
(2) OFr:

Car bien pensoit que il ne revendroit mes a piece

*for well thought-3sg that he neg would-return again a-while*
a cort, quant il s'em partiroit. (Q 13, 31)

*to court, when he refl-from-there would-leave*

'For (the king) was sure that he (=Galahad) would not return again to court for a while once he left.'

The equivalent of the grammatical Italian sentence is extremely rare in 13th-century OFr prose and will be considered here, pending a full discussion in section 5.3., to be ungrammatical. As early as Foulet (1928), it had been noted that this characteristic of OFr could be considered to follow directly from the fact that inversion is generally a main clause phenomenon. Foulet correlated "inversion" and "omission" of the subject pronoun and pointed out that, since inversion was rare in embedded clauses, overt (preverbal) pronouns were the norm there. The most felicitous environment for the omission of the pronoun is thus in a main clause where the subject would be postverbal if present, that is, in an inverted V2 clause:

(3) **Lors dist**  a Perceval que il essait a l'espee. (Q 6, 23)

*then said-3sg to Perceval that he try at the-sword*

'Then he told Perceval to try the sword'

Vanelli, Renzi, and Beninca (1985) provide the first account of null subjects in Old French (and several other medieval Romance languages that behave similarly) in a generative framework. Although their account does not go into theoretical detail, the groundwork it lays is firm and the interpretation of the data insightful. Vanelli, Renzi, and Benincà (henceforth VRB) interpret Foulet's correlation between inversion and omission as a requirement that the finite verb be on the left of the empty subject position, conjecturing that it is somehow in this configuration that "the inflectional ending identifies its subject with the maximum ease" (1985:171, my translation). They show that this skewed distribution of subject pronouns in OFr is shared with one set of Romance languages and not with the other: French, Franco-Provençal, some dialects of Occitan, the Northern Italian dialects, Rhaeto-Romance, and Florentine all showed this pattern in their medieval stages, while Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Rumanian, literary Italian, the central and southern Italian dialects, and the rest of the Occitan dialects did not. The same