On the uniform loss of Medieval French verb particles

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Medieval Romance had a system of directional/aspectual verb particles that looks strikingly similar to that of English. Examples are from Medieval French, a robustly attested variety.

(1) a. *et qu'il **alast hors** et parlast à luy* 'and that he would go out and speak to him' (*Reg. Chât.*, I, 382)
    b. *li ont **jus** la tieste **copée*** 'they cut his head down/off' (Mousquet, *Chronique,* 22705)
    c. *et puis leissié refroidir et **arriere bouillir*** 'then let (it) cool and then come back to a boil' (*Chs*, 11)

Such particles are rarely attested in French texts written after the 16th c., and cognate particle-like elements survive to a limited extent in other contemporary Romance varieties, and are fully productive in Northern Italian varieties. The collapse of the Medieval French particle system, documented in a disparate collection of studies published in the last 15 years, has served to support a number of claims about the role of particles in relation to other changes in the history of French: language standardization, the reorganization of the prepositional system, the lexicalization of Path prefixes, and the typological shift from Latin as a satellite-framed grammar to verb-framed Romance (e.g., Iacobini 2015; Marchello-Nizia 2002; Tremblay et al. 2004; Troberg & Burnett 2017).

The primary aim of this paper is to report the results of the first comprehensive diachronic analysis of four Medieval French particles: *jus* 'down', *fors/hors* 'out', *arrière* 'back', and *avant* 'forward'. Drawing on a corpus of over 200 million words, spanning the period between 1100 and 1699,[1] the data present a clearly uniform loss among all four particles despite the fact that each one is replaced by various different strategies for encoding directionality/aspect such as locative "orphan" prepositions (2a), directional Path verbs (2b), absence in pleonastic environments (2c, d), and *re*-prefixation or adverb use (2e).

(2) a. *aller **arriere/avant*** 'go back/forward' → *aller **en arrière/avant***
     b. *aller **hors/sus/jus/arriere*** 'go out/up/down/back'→ ***sortir/monter/descendre/retourner***
     c. *retourner **arriere*** 'return back' → *retourner*
     d. *descendre **jus*** 'descend down' → *descendre*
     e. *bouillir **arriere*** 'boil back' → ***re**bouillir* 'reboil'/ *bouillir **encore*** 'boil again'

Since no particle has a single replacement or competing form, previous attempts that apply Kroch (1989)'s Constant Rate Hypothesis conventionally as a means of determining a possible correlation among the particles have been inconclusive. We thus approach the problem differently, proposing a mixed-effects Poisson regression model, a relatively new technique in sociolinguistic studies and, to our knowledge, never used before with historical data. The model is particularly well-suited to count data from different sources, and allows a comparison of the four particles in tandem. Our analysis demonstrates that the four particles do not display any significant difference in their time course of change, as shown in Fig. 1, supporting an underlying grammatical change and casting doubts on claims that the disappearance was due to low-level lexical changes.

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[1] *Textes du Français Ancien* (1100–1449), a subset of *Frantext Moyen Français* (1300–1549), and ARTFL-FRANTEXT (1250–1299, 1500–1699)

A secondary aim of this paper is to demonstrate how our empirical analysis supports formal accounts such as that proposed in Troberg (2019a, b). Indeed, the argument from careful quantitative analysis appears to provide the strongest evidence that French underwent a momentous change in terms of syntactic possibilities for expressing resultative secondary predication, which not only involves particles, but adjectival resultative constructions as well.
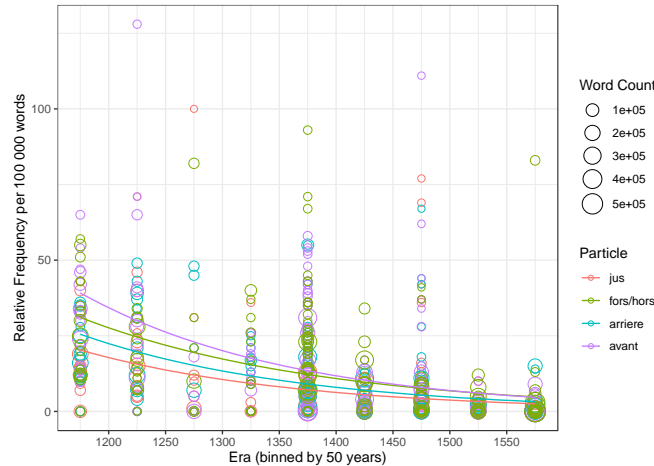

Fig. 1. Relative frequency of *jus, fors/hors, arrière, avant* from 1150 to 1599. Each data point represents an author. Anglo-Norman texts excluded.

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