

# Emerging uninflectedness in French clipped verbs

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Maria Copot

Ninoh Agostinho Da Silva   Ahmed Beji   Arno Watiez

Olivier Bonami

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Université Paris Cité, LLF, CNRS

# The phenomenon

(just trust me)

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# Clipping in French

- **Clipping**: removing phonological material from a word form, leaving its lexical and morphosyntactic meaning unaltered

*déjeuner* ‘lunch’ → *déj* ‘lunch’

- Mostly conveys **informality** (social meaning)
  - Although see Kerleroux (1999) and Anselme, Bonami, and Burnett (2021) on semantic specialization in clipped action nouns.

*intoxication* ‘intoxication’ → *intox* ‘hoax’

- Highly **productive** in French
  - Well-attested since the 1800s - widely used
  - Antoine (2000) documents more than 1000 cases in his dictionary

# Morphological status

- Clipping **feeds word-formation**:

Base	Clipped	Derivative
<i>vélocipède</i> 'bicycle'	<i>vélo</i>	<i>vélodrome</i> 'bicycle racing arena'
<i>automobile</i> 'automobile'	<i>auto</i>	<i>automitrailleuse</i> '[machine gun]-carrying (armored) car'

# What can be clipped?

- Mostly found with **nouns**, but not only.

Part of speech	General lexicon	Clippings Count	Clippings Proportion
<b>Noun</b>	57%	911	79%
<b>Noun or adjective</b>	8%	108	9%
Adjective	17%	97	8%
Adverb	4%	30	3%
Verb	13%	4	<1%
Preposition	<1%	1	<1%
Interjection	<1%	1	<1%
<b>Total</b>			<b>1152</b>

(Data from New et al. 2007; Antoine 2000)

# Clipping and inflection

- Only 0.7% of nouns exhibit **distinct SG and PL** forms outside of optional *liaison* contexts

SG	PL	Translation
/pɛksɔ̃n/	/pɛksɔ̃n/	'person'
/œj/	/jø/	'eye'
/vitkaj/	/vitko/	'stained glass'

Data from Bonami, Caron, and Plancq (2014)

# Clipping and inflection

- Only 0.7% of nouns exhibit **distinct SG and PL** forms outside of optional *liaison* contexts
- Only 39% of adjectives exhibit any **inflectional contrast** in form outside of *liaison* contexts.

M.SG	M.PL	F.SG	F.PL	Translation
/ʒoli/	/ʒoli/	/ʒoli/	/ʒoli/	'pretty'
/nɛt/	/nɛt/	/nɛt/	/nɛt/	'clean, clear'
/global/	/globo/	/global/	/global/	'global'
/bo/	/bo/	/bɛl/	/bɛl/	'beautiful'

Data from Bonami, Caron, and Plancq (2014)

# Clipping in verbs: a path to uninflectability?

- Verbs exhibit lots of clear affixal exponence, although zero marking is highly prevalent.

Finite forms						
	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
IND.PRS.DEIC	lav	lav	lav	lav-ḿ	lav-e	lav
IND.PRS.ANA	lav-ε	lav-ε	lav-ε	lav-jḿ	lav-je	lav-ε
IND.PST.DEIC	lav-ε	lav-a	lav-a	lav-am	lav-at	lav-εḿ
IND.FUT.DEIC	lav-əḿε	lav-əḿa	lav-əḿa	lav-əḿḿ	lav-əḿe	lav-əḿḿ
IND.FUT.ANA	lav-əḿε	lav-əḿε	lav-əḿε	lav-əḿjḿ	lav-əḿje	lav-əḿε
SBJV.PRS	lav	lav	lav	lav-jḿ	lav-je	lav
SBJV.PST	lav-as	lav-as	lav-a	lav-asjḿ	lav-asje	lav-as
IMP	—	lav	—	lav-ḿ	lav-e	—

Nonfinite forms					
INF	PRS.PTCP	PST.PTCP			
		M.SG	F.SG	M.PL	F.PL
lav-e	lav-ā	lav-e	lav-e	lav-e	lav-e



# Documented uninflectable verbs i

- Three well-documented small families of uninflectable verbs (see e.g. Antoine 2000; Cerquiglioni 2019; Gadet and Wachs 2016):
  1. The verb *fiche*, as a euphemistic alternative to slang *foutre* ‘do, make, give’ (archaic, ‘have sex’) found in the infinitive with no suffix.
  2. Argotic verbs in *-ave* ultimately borrowed from Romani (*chourave* ‘steal’, *bicrave* ‘sell’, etc.) or formed by analogy to these (*bédave* ‘smoke weed’)

# Documented uninflectable verbs ii

## 3. Verlan formations, with or without clipping.

Base	Verlan	Clipped verlan	<i>Translation</i>
<i>énerver</i>	<i>vénère</i>	—	'vex'
<i>choper</i>	<i>pécho</i>	—	'catch, seduce'
<i>niquer</i>	<i>kéni</i>	<i>ken</i>	'fuck'
<i>fumer</i>	<i>méfu</i>	<i>mef</i>	'smoke'

# Productive generation of uninflectability

THOMAS:

Oh non, je me suis encore fait déco!  
Oh no 1SG.NOM 1SG.ACC be.PRS.1SG again make.PST.PTCP disconnect.INF  
'Oh no, I was disconnected again!'

GABRIEL:

Hein, il t' a déco?  
What 3SG.M.NOM 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG disconnect.PST.PTCP  
'What, he disconnected you?'

Eh ben reco-toi!  
Well then reconnect.IMP.2SG-2SG.ACC  
'Well then reconnect!'

[...]

THOMAS:

Je suis redéco!  
1SG.NOM be.PRS.1SG redisconnect.PST.PTCP  
'I am redisconnected!'

(Olivier's son speaking with a friend. September 28, 2014)

# Clipped verbs in French

- Potentially large-scale **emergence** of uninflectability!
- To our knowledge, we are the **first to document** this as a fairly widespread, productive phenomenon (cf Antoine (2000)'s 4 clipped verbs)
- **Why?**
  - A property of teen speech
  - Developed in the last 10 years

# Exploring the data

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# Finding clipped verbs in corpora

- Create a method to **find clipped verbs** in corpora and **reconstruct** their full form.

For each verb in POS-tagged corpus:

1. Check if

- Not found in inflected lexicon (Hathout, Sajous, and Calderone, 2014) (existing inflected form)
- Not in all caps (acronym), capitalised non-sentence initially (proper name)
- Is substring of existing verb in inflected lexicon

# Finding clipped verbs in corpora

- Create a method to **find clipped verbs** in corpora and **reconstruct** their full form.

For each verb in POS-tagged corpus:

1. Check if **potential clipped uninflectable form**
2. Get all **candidate inflected forms** for which the word is a substring

<i>déco</i>	<i>décorer</i>
	<i>décoration</i>
	<i>déconnectera</i>
	<i>déconnecte</i>
	...

# Finding clipped verbs in corpora

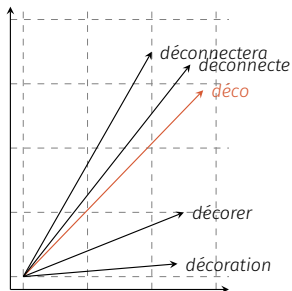
- Create a method to **find clipped verbs** in corpora and **reconstruct** their full form.

For each verb in POS-tagged corpus:

1. Check if **potential clipped uninflectable form**
2. Get all **candidate inflected forms**
3. Evaluate **best match** with distributional semantics and heuristics

je me déco de l'ordinateur

déconnecte  
déconnectera  
décorer  
décoration  
...





# Does it work?

- In a test suite of 362 sentences containing a clipped form

Correctly identified		87%
False positives		0% (but probably luck)
False negatives		13%
- In FrWaC (Baroni et al. 2009), **manual evaluation of candidate full forms** (~8000 tokens annotated)
  - ~50% of the time, the correct full form was assigned by the method
  - But the target form was often in the top three suggestions
- **Forthcoming result:** a database of clipped French verbs

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Thanks to Firas Chalali and Thomas Gaudry!

# Some interesting data i

- Two different verbs can have the **same clipped form**

supporter  
supprimer    supp

- The **same verb** can have two different clipped forms

modifier    mod  
                  modif

## Some interesting data ii

- Stem allomorphy is frequent in French verbs (marking TAM, person, number combinations). **Clipping doesn't erase all inflectional information**

VOULOIR	voudra	IND.FUT.3SG	voudr
	voulez	IND.PRS.2PL	voul

## Some interesting data iii

- **Overabundance** between inflection and lack thereof

niquer    ken    kenez<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://twitter.com/NellyKoffi9/status/1519410504346836993>

# Just textspeak? An experiment

- An **experiment** to check that people actually accepted clipped forms in speech
  - Recording: word in minimal sentence frame (Q and A).

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FORMAL Q, FULL FORM

INFORMAL Q, CLIPPED FORM

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Q T'as **pensé** quoi de la dernière saison ?

T'as **kiffé** la dernière saison ?

A Eh, je **préfère** celle d'avant.

Bof, je **pref** celle d'avant.

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- Participants had to
  - Give a synonym for the A
  - Rate if A was socially appropriate for Q
  - If so, rate to what extent they could imagine hearing A on the street.

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Thanks to Alice Pellet, Cindy Pereira and Arno Watiez!

# The experiment - variables

- **Manipulated variables**
  - Formal vs informal Q
  - Full vs clipped form in A
  - Noun vs verb
- **Items:** 60 per participant
  - 20 nouns, 10 verbs for each combo [ $\pm$ formal Q,  $\pm$ clipped]
- **Participants:** 25

# The experiment - results

- Overall, clipped verbs were judged **just as possible** as their full form counterpart (conditional on an informal context)
- Better for **younger speakers** and in more **informal** contexts
- A **recent** construction: on average, acceptability for clipped verbs just a little lower than for clipped nouns

What does this teach us about  
uninflectability?

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# Summing up

- **Clipping** French verbs yields **uninflectable** lexemes.
  - A phenomenon so far not taken into account by theories of uninflectability
- Intriguing **interactions with other morphological questions**, both for uninflectability and clipping

# Clipping as uninflectability

- A word can be **partially uninflectable**: clipping retains some morphosyntactic information.
- Opens questions on the **nature and ordering** of clipping
  - **Lexeme formation**: using clipped words as derivational bases suggests clipping then derivation then inflection  
vélocipède → vélo → vélodrome
  - Low-level **phonological** process: retention of TAM info suggests inflection before clipping - a cycle?  
VOULOIR      voudra    voudr  
                  voulez    voul
- No need for characterisation in such terms, the lexicon is **analogical and paradigmatic**.

# Clipping as uninflectability

- A **new pathway** to uninflectability
  - Prototypical uninflectability:
    - a word being **phonologically ill-suited** to join the inflection system (cf Russian *kenguru*)
    - historical **neutralisation** (cf Italian *città*)
  - French clipped verbs have **innovated** uninflectability in a context in which it is not necessary.