

ARTICLE

# *Que dalle!* The evolution of a French colloquial negation word

Filip Verroens 

Universiteit Gent (Belgium)

Email: [filip.verroens@ugent.be](mailto:filip.verroens@ugent.be)

(Received 27 August 2024; revised 29 January 2025; accepted 20 March 2025)

## Abstract

The present study constitutes a first contribution to the understanding of the French pronoun *que dalle* ('nothing'). First, we looked at its syntactic flexibility, its semantic strength in conveying zero quantification, and its pragmatic role in informal language. Then we compared *que dalle* with its near synonym *rien* and analysed its development. The results can be summarized as follows. On a descriptive level, we can conclude that, in spite of their different diaphasic distribution, *que dalle* functions in much the same way as *rien*, but the former differs from the latter in terms of syntax (subject position, attributive adjective), stylistics and especially pragmatics. On a methodological level, we hypothesized that *que dalle* originates in the exceptive structure *ne...que* ('only') but the corpus data were insufficient to demonstrate this assumption. On a theoretical level, different processes, i.e. lexicalization and grammaticalization, could be distinguished. We acknowledge that individual quantifiers can be very different in nature and have different diachronic paths: the development of *que dalle* differs from that of *rien* in its postverbal use, and it tends toward inherent negativity in fragment answers.

## Résumé

La présente étude constitue une première contribution à la compréhension du pronom français *que dalle*. Nous avons d'abord examiné sa flexibilité syntaxique, sa force sémantique à transmettre une quantification nulle et son rôle pragmatique dans le langage informel. Nous avons ensuite comparé *que dalle* à son quasi-synonyme *rien* et analysé son développement. Les résultats peuvent être résumés comme suit. Sur le plan descriptif, nous pouvons conclure que, malgré leur distribution diaphasique différente, *que dalle* fonctionne à peu près de la même manière que *rien*, mais le premier diffère du second en termes de syntaxe (position du sujet, adjectif attributif), de stylistique et surtout de pragmatique. Sur le plan méthodologique, nous avons avancé l'hypothèse que *que dalle* trouve son origine dans la structure restrictive *ne...que* mais les données du corpus étaient insuffisantes pour démontrer cette hypothèse. Sur le plan théorique, différents processus, à savoir la lexicalisation et la grammaticalisation, ont pu être distingués. Nous reconnaissons que les quantificateurs individuels peuvent être de nature très différente et avoir des chemins diachroniques différents : le développement de *que dalle* diffère de celui de *rien* dans son usage postverbal et il tend vers une négativité inhérente dans les mots-phrases.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The French expression *que dalle*, a colloquial synonym of the n(egation)-word<sup>2</sup> *rien* ‘nothing’ (1), offers a wide variety of interesting perspectives. Morphologically, the composition of *que dalle* is complex in relation to *rien* since it contains two morphemes: a *qu-* word followed by a noun. Different *que* constructions can be distinguished in French, i.a. “*que* jonctif” (Pusch 2015), “*que* médiatif” (Anscombe 2018), but there seems to exist no other *que* + N constructions in the dictionary (Robert et al. 2018) beside some variants of *que dalle* (i.e. *que couic*, *que fifre*, *que pouic*, *que tchi*) which we will not discuss further in this article. On the syntactic level, the expression *que dalle* functions as a negative indefinite pronoun and can occur with (2) or without (3) the preverbal particle *ne*. It can also appear as a word phrase (4) and represents different but closely related semantisms : a negative pronoun (= *rien*) in (2)–(3), a refusal (= *non*) in (4).

- (1) Toi, t’ es **que dalle**, t’ es rien. Mais elle, elle nous fait un peu flipper, tu vois.  
‘You, you’re nothing, you’re nothing. But she, she freaks us out a bit, you see.’  
(Frantext – A. Quentin, *Soeur*, 2019)
- (2) J’ ai cru que quelque chose arrivait sur la route, mais il n’ y a **que dalle**.  
‘I thought something was happening on the road, but there’s nothing.’  
(Frantext – J.-P. Manchette, *La position du tireur couché*, 1981)
- (3) Me rappeler son air supérieur a mis par terre mes raisonnements, la logique vaut **que dalle** devant l’ assurance des garçons.  
‘To remind me of his superior air has put my reasonings on the ground, logic is worthless in front of the assurance of the boys.’ (Frantext – A. Ernaux, *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, 1977)
- (4) – Barre-toi, même.  
‘Get off, kid.’  
– **Que dalle !**  
‘No way !’ (Frantext – P. Pécherot, *Les brouillards de la Butte*, 2001)

On the etymological level, the only level at which *que dalle* has been described to our knowledge, many hypotheses about its origin have been suggested. The *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (von Wartburg 1948) links the expression to the word *dalle* ‘(floor)tile’, which is difficult to explain from a semantic point of view. Others perceive a Breton origin (*dall* ‘blind’ i.e. seeing nothing, Lebesque 1970), an Occitan one (*coa d’ala* ‘the tip of the wing’, i.e. nothing to eat, Vernet 2007), a Lorraine origin (*dail* ‘joke’, Cellard and Rey 1991) or a Romani one (*dail* ‘nothing’, Duneton 2014). For the Petit Robert (Robert et al. 2018) *que dalle* can

<sup>1</sup>We are especially grateful to Dominique Willems, Peter Lauwers, Anne Breitbarth, Karen De Clercq, Pierre Larrivé, the audience at Diachro XI (Madrid, 22–24 May 2024), and three anonymous reviewers for comments and discussion. The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>2</sup>According to Giannakidou (2006:328), an expression  $\alpha$  is an n-word iff:

- a.  $\alpha$  can be used in structures containing sentential negation or another  $\alpha$  -expression yielding a reading equivalent to one logical negation; and
- b.  $\alpha$  can provide a negative fragment answer.

be traced back to the word *daye* ‘chorus of song’. Still others (George 1970; Gaston 2016) give a numismatic interpretation to *dalle*, denoting an ancient Swedish (*dahler*) or Dutch (*daalder*) currency. This explanation seems plausible given the existence of a fundamental metaphor that identifies the name of a small coin and the notion ‘little thing, nothing’. Whatever the case, the different hypotheses show that the etymology of *que dalle* is no longer transparent because of several linguistic and historical influences. The common point of most explanations is that they express a small amount, a negligible or worthless thing. The different perspectives and in particular the role of the element *que* raise different research questions about the use of *que dalle* both in synchrony and in diachrony:

- RQ1: What is the distribution of the different structures?
- RQ2: To what extent do the structures of *que dalle* diverge from those of *rien*?
- RQ3: How do the different structures evolve in time?
- RQ4: Can we observe any kind of regular patterns in the development of *que dalle* which could document a possible lexicalization and/or grammaticalization process?

The article is organized as follows. The next section presents the background literature and the hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the data and the corpus-based methodology. The findings for the different structures of *que dalle* (RQ1) are described in section 4 while section 5 discusses the main synchronic differences with *rien* (RQ2). The diachronic analysis in section 6 deals with the specific properties and the semantic-pragmatic development of *que dalle* (RQ3 and RQ4). In section 7, we address some methodological and theoretical issues in relation to the evolution of *que dalle*. Finally, conclusions are presented in section 8.

## 2. Background literature and hypotheses

The literature on *que dalle* is limited to a few observations. First attested in 1829 and of debated etymological origin (see section 1), *que dalle* most often occurs with verbs of cognition, such as *entraver* ‘to understand’ or *piger* ‘to grasp’ (Von Wartburg 1948:XV/2, p. 50; Esnault 1966:221; Cellard and Rey 1991:263). Muller (1991:54) describes *que dalle* as being close to standard negation, of which it is a slang variant, particularly suited for dialogue and especially for quantified negation. The absence of an in-depth study on *que dalle*, both synchronically and diachronically, and its proximity to *rien*, leads us to analyse the latter first. In this section, we briefly present the different functions of *rien*, discuss its evolution and end up with some assumptions for the study of *que dalle*.

The indefinite pronoun *rien* belongs, together with *personne* (‘nobody’), the determiner *aucun* (‘non’), and the adverbs *nulle part* (‘nowhere’) and *jamais* (‘never’), to the class of n-words. All these words semantically combine a negation and an existential quantification but they differ in the domain of quantification, i.e. in their ontological category (Haspelmath 1997:21). As such *rien* indicates zero quantification in the domain of things. Denying the existence of a non-animated

referent in a given domain of reference, it has the status of negative<sup>3</sup> element either with or without the particle *ne* (5) and in an autonomous use as word-phrase (6). Depending on its use, this pronoun is deictic, anaphoric or generic (Riegel et al., 1994:211). Functionally, *rien* can be direct object (5), subject (7), subject complement (8) or prepositional phrase (9). *Rien* can be completed by a partitive complement, viz a post-determination by a noun or an adjective (10) introduced by *de*.

- (5) Il n'a **rien** dit.  
'He said nothing.'
- (6) Qu'a-t-il fait ? – **Rien**.  
'What did he do? – Nothing.'
- (7) **Rien** n'est plus vrai.  
'Nothing could be truer.'
- (8) Ce n'est **rien**.  
'It's nothing.'
- (9) Il ne s'est douté de **rien**.  
'He suspected nothing.'
- (10) Je n'ai vu **rien** d'intéressant.  
'I didn't see anything interesting.'
- (11) Je n'ai **rien** vu d'intéressant.  
'I didn't see anything interesting.'
- (12) Il ne faut pas te mettre en colère pour **un rien**.  
'Don't get angry over nothing.'

*Rien* generally follows the placement rules for other indefinite pronouns, i.e. it occupies the place of the noun phrase in the sentence. Sometimes the pronoun *rien* has a specific behaviour. When the verb is constructed directly, *rien* is inserted between the auxiliary and the past participle (5). On the other hand, it is placed after the past participle in the case of a prepositional phrase (9). Another peculiarity is that when *rien* is completed by an adjective, to which it is linked by *de*, either it remains in its place after the auxiliary (11), or (less frequently) it is placed, with the adjective, after the main verb (10). A final use of *rien* is as a masculine noun (12). The grammaticalization of *rien* (from Latin *rem* accusative of *res* 'thing') into a pronoun is completed in the second half of the 12th century when it has ceased, in subject use, to agree with the feminine which was the gender of the noun *rien* (Marchello-Nizia et al. 2020:719–720).<sup>4</sup> As several studies have shown (Bréal 1904; Martin 1966; Sarré 2003; Martineau and Déprez 2004; Labelle and Espinal 2014;

<sup>3</sup>Unlike *pas* 'not', *plus* 'no longer' and *guère* 'scarcely', the n-words *jamais* 'never', *personne* 'nobody' and *rien* 'nothing' can be used in both negative and non-negative contexts. The lexical value of *rien* is generally negative, but it can in some contexts approach that of its antonym *quelque chose* 'something', e.g. in (i), it is part of an infinitival clause following a negated matrix verb. For the other contexts, see Muller (1991:265).

(i) *Il n'est pas besoin de rien ajouter* (Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté*, 1949:55).  
'There is no need to add anything.'

<sup>4</sup>Haspelmath (1997:182): "The last doubts about its new pronoun status are dispelled when the original generic noun falls into disuse, as in the case of [...] *rien* which can no longer be used in the sense of 'thing'."

Hansen 2020, Larrivé and Kallel 2020; among others), *rien* initially had a positive value in Old French and has gradually adopted a negative connotation in combination with the particle *ne*. On the pathway from positive to negative, three variants can be distinguished: *rien* as a noun (13), as a Negative Polarity Item<sup>5</sup> (14), and as an n-word (15).<sup>6</sup> Unlike NPIs, n-words can be diagnosed by use in fragment answers, constituent negation and double negation readings.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they can be used preverbally which is hardly the case for NPIs (Larrivé and Kallel 2020:431).

- (13) Quant la **rien** que ge plus amoie voi morte, vie que me valt? (Foulet 1977:272)  
'When I see dead the thing that I loved most, what is life worth to me?'
- (14) Honnis soit ki **rien** lour donra ! (Foulet 1977:275)  
'Shamed be he who gives them anything!'
- (15) Elle (ne) lui envoie **rien**.  
'She sends him nothing.'

In Contemporary French, *rien* is essentially an n-word. The masculine noun *rien* survives in a few expressions and the polarity use, attested until the 19th century, is considered an archaism (Labelle and Espinal 2014:216). According to Hansen (2013), it can be assumed that the evolution of French clause negation with *rien*, but also other quantifiers (e.g. *personne* 'nobody', *jamais* 'never' ...), is largely parallel to the grammatical change observed in the standard negation *ne...pas*, a process commonly referred to as Jespersen's Cycle (Jespersen 1917; Dahl 1979). Table 1 summarizes this cycle for the quantifier *rien*.

The diachronic sources for the modern quantifiers were, for the most part, originally positive in meaning, like postverbal *pas* 'step', *mie* 'crumb', *point* 'dot'<sup>8</sup> and were used as negation reinforcer in connection with preverbal *ne* (Stage 1). Over time, the second element of the bipartite negation took on negative polarity uses (Stage 2), and in the end, the original preverbal element becomes optional (Stage 3)

<sup>5</sup>Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) like *anything or ever* are dependent for their distribution or interpretation on a non-veridical context produced by e.g., clausal negation, a question or a conditional (Giannakidou 1998).

<sup>6</sup>For the frequencies of these uses in literary texts, see Martineau and Déprez (2004:43), and in legal texts, see Larrivé and Kallel (2020:437).

<sup>7</sup>Larrivé (2021) identifies different micro-steps in the transition of polarity-sensitive items (PSI) from negative polarity items to n-words, i.e. intrinsically negative words. These steps are seen in specific linguistic contexts that reflect increasing negativity in the function of a PSI:

1. Fragment Answers: Negative fragment answers (e.g., "Who did it?" – "Nobody.") are the first indication that an item may acquire intrinsic negativity.
2. Double Negation: The ability to participate in double negation contexts (e.g., "Nobody didn't do it" meaning "Everybody did it").
3. Constituent Negation: When an item acquires local negative scope within a phrase (e.g., "working for nothing" meaning working in vain).

<sup>8</sup>*Rien, pas, point*, etc. are called "minimizers" (Bolinger 1972), i.e. nouns of positive polarity denoting minimal units of entities or processes (Hansen 2020: 1682). Hoeksema (2001: 175–176) adds that minimizers can denote not only something small, but also something worthless, even pejorative. Minimizers are defined above all as rhetorical devices that reinforce a certain proposition (Bolinger 1972). In the scope of negation, they serve to forcefully deny that a proposition is valid by designating, in a conventional manner, the end point of a pragmatic scale (Hoeksema 2002).

**Table 1.** The evolution of French clause negation with quantifiers (Hansen 2013:67)

Stage	Example	Description
Stage 1	<i>Je ne dis (rien)</i> 'I do not say (a thing)'	A positive NP optionally accompanies preverbal <i>ne</i> to make the scope of the negation explicit
Stage 2	<i>Je ne dis rien</i> 'I don't say anything'	<i>ne</i> + negative polarity item
Stage 3	<i>Je (ne) dis rien</i> 'I don't say anything/ I say nothing'	n-word optionally accompanied by preverbal <i>ne</i>
(Stage 4 [Future French?])	<i>Je dis rien</i> 'I say nothing'	Negative quantifier)

or is lost altogether and the postverbal element comes to carry negative meaning on its own (Stage 4). Several studies (Ashby 1981; Coveney 1996; Armstrong and Smith 2002; Hansen and Malderez 2004; Meisner 2016) have shown that *ne*-deletion has been steadily increasing and today there is a clear tendency to drop *ne* in modern spoken French.

Hansen (2013), however, notes that the suggested cycle is highly simplified because individual quantifiers differ significantly in nature and follow distinct diachronic paths. Indeed, it should already be noticed that there's an important difference between both: there's one word for *rien*, two words for *que dalle*. This morphological difference between *rien* and *que dalle* could have important diachronic consequences, i.e. the development of *que dalle* may not necessarily proceed like that of *rien*. With regard to the development of *rien*, we can observe some common effects of grammaticalization<sup>9</sup> (Hopper and Traugott 2003; Narrog and Heine 2011; Lehmann 2015). First, *rien* loses its original lexical meaning and its meaning becomes functionally dependent on its host constituent, i.e. the development from a positive noun ('thing') towards a negative polarity item and n-word ('nothing').<sup>10</sup> Second, there is the loss of morphosyntactic features (decategorialization): the noun grammaticalizing into a pronoun cannot be directly modified by an adjective (10).

In sum, we aim to test the following hypotheses in this study:

1. In spite of their different diaphasic distribution, *que dalle* functions in much the same way as *rien*.
2. *Que dalle* follows the evolution of the other quantifiers, in particular that of *rien* as presented in Table 1.

<sup>9</sup>Defined as "[t]he change whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions." (Hopper and Traugott 2003: xv).

<sup>10</sup>The evolution from polarity item into an n-word took place during the 13th century (Labelle and Espinal, 2014:215).

### 3. Data and methodology

Our data sample is drawn from the electronic literary database Frantext from which we have selected the subcorpus *corpus moderne* (1800–1979) and the subcorpus *corpus contemporain* (1980–present). We haven't found any attestations of *que dalle* or graphic variants beyond the selected period (see §6). In total, we collected and analysed all 208 observations across the two corpora (Table 2).

Table 2. Frantext corpus sample

	N texts	N words	N <i>que dalle</i>
Frantext – corpus moderne	3024	149,764,941	60
Frantext – corpus contemporain	631	41,729,482	148

In order to compare with *rien* (§ 5) and to investigate the evolution of *que dalle* (§6), we will first analyze the syntactic structures into which the expression fits (§4). For that purpose, every case in our corpus sample was annotated in a systematic way for the following variables:

1. Structure : dependent ; autonomous (word phrase)
2. *Ne*-deletion: According to several empirical studies (Ashby 1981: 678, Coveney 1996: 76, Hansen and Malderez 2004: 23; Meisner 2016:180) *ne*-deletion is less often present in negative sentences with quantifiers than in standard negative clauses with *pas*, and the different quantifiers do not all appear to favour *ne*-deletion to the same extent. With regard to the exceptive structure *ne...que* ('only'), the proportion of *ne* attested in spoken language is 35 to 40% (Blanche-Benveniste et al. 1990:189).
3. Lexical verb type : According to Esnault (1966:221) and Cellard and Rey (1991: 263), the expression *que dalle* is frequent with *il y a* ('there is/are'), *valoir* 'to be worth', cognition verbs (*comprendre* 'to understand'; *entraver*, *piger* 'to get'), and verbs of perception (*voir* 'to see' ; *entendre* 'to hear' or their equivalents).

Since the Frantext data serves in the first place to map out the diachronic evolution of *que dalle*, it seems useful to supplement it with online data in order to capture the latest trends. As such, the Frantext dataset will be completed with data from the French Ten Ten Corpus (15683 *que dalle* tokens) but the latter is not quantified in a systematic way. The French Ten Ten Corpus, version 2.0. [2012] (Kilgarriff et al. 2014), is a web corpus searchable through the Sketch Engine interface and includes a wide range of web data: journalistic texts, Wikipedia, forums, etc. The total number of words amounts to almost ten billion.

### 4. Analysis of *que dalle*

Table 3 shows that *que dalle* predominantly occurs in the dependent structure where it can be direct object (16) and subject albeit always in a repeated sequence (17).

**Table 3.** Distribution of the different structures with *que dalle*

	Dependent structure	Word phrase	Ne-deletion
Frantext – corpus moderne	51 (85 %)	9 (15 %)	34/51 (67%)
Frantext – corpus contemporain	140 (95 %)	8 (5%)	118/140 (84 %)

- (16) je revois tout, son épanouissement timide à la gare, lorsqu’ elle m’ apercevait sur le quai, sa maladroite petite main, le jour où elle avait pris sous ma dictée, avec tant de fautes d’ orthographe et de bonne volonté, des pages d’ un livre de moi auxquelles elle ne comprenait saintement **que dalle**. (Frantext – A. Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, 1954)

‘I see everything again, her timid blooming at the station, when she saw me on the platform, her clumsy little hand, the day she had taken my dictation, with so many spelling errors and good will, pages of a book of mine which she did not understand at all.’

- (17) Mémé restait de marbre ou alors ricanait : « Ah, ça ! la nature elle doit drôlement l’ aimer pour cultiver à c’ point son accent de naissance ! Remarque sans lui, qu’ est -ce qui lui resterait à Miss Serpillière ? Rien. **que dalle**. Nib de nib. » (Frantext – F. Seguin, *L’Arme à gauche*, 1990)

‘Mémé was either stunned or sneered: “Ah, nature must love him a hell of a lot to cultivate his native accent to such an extent! Without him, what would Miss Serpillière have left? Nothing. Nil. Nib de nib.»’

*Que dalle* can also be used in a prepositional phrase (18), as subject complement (19) and can be post-determined by a PP (19).<sup>11</sup> In contrast with *rien*, it functions also as an attributive adjective (20). Limited to the French Ten Ten Corpus corpus, and even there very rare, N= 12 out of 15683 *que dalle* tokens, it can also take the form of a masculine noun in *un gros que dalle* (21).

- (18) D’ abord à propos de cet échange de coupures, y a pas de dèche : personne semble vouloir le risquer. D’ où découle qu’ il s’ est révolutionné pour **que dalle**! (Frantext – A. Simonin, *Du mouron pour les petits oiseaux*, 1960)

‘First about this exchange of bills, there is no waste: no one seems to want to risk it. From which follows that he has revolutionized himself for nothing.’

- (19) Je lui dis ou pas ? Non. Je vais lui offrir un caoua dehors et jacter d’ autre chose, de n’ importe quoi pourvu que ce soit **que dalle** en importance. (Frantext – J.-L. Degaudenzi, *Zone*, 1987)

‘Should I tell him or not? No. I’m going to offer him a coffee outside and talk about something else, anything as long as it’s not important.’

<sup>11</sup>Post-determination by DE + noun/adj. as in (10) is absent in Frantext but can easily be found on the internet :

(i) Peut-être le fait qu’il se passe **que dalle** d’intéressant. (*French Ten Ten Corpus*)  
‘Maybe the fact that nothing interesting is going on.’



- (20) Paraît que c' est introuvable quasiment. On vaira. Journée sans sel ni poivre aucun. Journée **que dalle**. ça vaut dix lignes. (Frantext – R. Fallet, *Carnets de jeunesse*, 1947)  
 'Seems that it is almost impossible to find. We'll see. Day without any salt or pepper. Miserable day. it's worth ten lines.'
- (21) pas de sous, pas d'adhérents, pas de parti, bref, **un gros que dalle**, et pour faire briller leurs idées à l'AN faudra qu'ils se lèvent de bonne heure!... (French Ten Ten Corpus)  
 'no money, no members, no party, in short, a big nothing, and to make their ideas shine at the AN they will have to get up early!'

The meaning usually is that of a negation, i.e. a lack of quantity, nothing. Often, the shift from positive to zero quantification is emphasized by (*ne*)... *plus* ('more'), like in (22). The French Ten Ten Corpus supplies also a few observations where the meaning of *que dalle* is close to the standard negation *ne...pas* ('not') (23). *Que dalle* can also appear in a double negation context (24).

- (22) Six mois de Drancy et au retour plus **que dalle**, ni boulot, ni fric ... plus de conjoint quelquefois ... les bons amis qui se détournent ayant troqué leur francisque pour une croix de Lorraine, voire une faucille et un marteau. (Frantext – A. Boudard, *Les Enfants de choeur*, 1982)  
 'Six months from Drancy and on the way back nothing more than slab, no job, no money ... sometimes no longer a spouse ... the good friends who turn away having traded their Francisque for a cross of Lorraine, even a sickle and a hammer.'
- (23) La 11 à New York avec cette bagnole de merde qui freine **que dalle**, j'en ai vraiment eu horreur. (French Ten Ten Corpus)  
 'I really hated the 11 in New York with that crappy car that doesn't brake at all...'
- (24) Nous autres, on se cavalaît. Il y eut pas mal de Roumanis d'arrêtés. Séances de cour d'Assises. Condamnations. Mais personne n'y comprenait **que dalle**. (Frantext – B. Cendrars, *L'Homme foudroyé*, 1945)  
 'We were running around. There were quite a few Roma arrested. Assize court sessions. Convictions. But no one understood anything about it.'

The meaning is less transparent in elliptical constructions (25) or when *que dalle* is detached (26). The example (25) could be misleading at first sight, but *que dalle* is always non-animated, in (25) it means 'nothing, no answer'. In (26), the meaning is closer to the pragmatic meaning of the word phrase structure, e.g. a refusal.

- (25) Le gars attend un moment, les pieds ballants dans le gouffre, et finalement, il demande, d' une toute petite voix : « Y a quelqu'un ? » ... **que dalle**. Il répète, un peu plus haut: « Y a quelqu'un ? » Une voix profonde, s'élevant de nulle part, monte alors jusqu'à lui: « Oui, dit la voix, il y a Moi, Dieu! (Frantext – D. Pennac, *La Fée Carabine*, 1987)  
 'The guy waits a moment, his feet dangling in the abyss, and finally, he asks, in a very small voice: "Is anyone there?" ... nothing. He repeats, a little louder: "Is anyone there?" A deep voice, rising from nowhere, then rises to him : "Yes, says the voice, it is Me, God!'

- (26) Je le commencerai peut-être avant l'hiver, lui ou l'autre, mais en tout cas pas avant d'être assuré qu' il soit accepté par les Domat. **que dalle**, travailler pour du vent. Je ne crois pas aux gloires posthumes et même si j' y croyais ça me laisserait frigidaire. (Frantext – R. Fallet, *Carnets de jeunesse*, 1947)  
 'I may start it before winter, him or the other, but in any case not before being assured that it will be accepted by the Domat. It's out of the question to work for the wind. I don't believe in posthumous glories and even if I did it would leave me cold.'

The word phrase structure (27) is already present in the corpus moderne but the frequency remains limited throughout both corpora (Table 3). When used in a separate utterance, or used prosodically independently from the rest of the sentence as in (26), *que dalle* behaves like a pragmatic marker as defined by Brinton (2017:9). As pragmatic marker, *que dalle* does not have a textual usage but highlights instead the interpersonal connection and is polysemic: indignation/insult<sup>12</sup> (27), difference of opinion using negation in the sense of *non!* or *pas du tout!* (28),<sup>13</sup> but also zero quantification (= 'nothing at all') (29) as in the dependent structure.

- (27) Ce que mon oncle peut être mauvais joueur ! En effet, il râlait tout le temps. Et tignous, avec ça ! J' vous dis que j' ai coupé ! **que dalle!** Il faisait son oeil mauvais et son visage de grand sec devenait blême. (Frantext – R. Guérin, *L'Apprenti*, 1946)  
 'What my uncle can be a bad loser! In fact, he was nagging all the time. And mean, with that! I tell you that I cut! damn it! He made his evil eye and his bored face turned pale.'
- (28) « La période noire de l'Occupation », qu'ils disent tous depuis. Même Jeannot le dit – Hanjüre plutôt : « noire », **que dalle!** Soleil, liberté, jeune vert des feuilles nouvelles, platanes pleins d'oiseaux chiant sur les casques de fer. Et le goût de la marmelade, goût à jamais perdu, dix kilos de marmelade en bidon cylindrique au-dessus du Frizou blindé, le paradis. (Frantext – J.-P. Chabrol, *La Folie des miens*, 1977)  
 "The dark period of the Occupation", which they all say since. Even Jeannot says it – Hanjüre rather: "black", no way! Sun, freedom, young green new leaves, plane trees full of birds shitting on iron helmets. And the taste of marmalade, a taste forever lost, ten kilos of marmalade in a cylindrical container above the armored Frizou, paradise.'
- (29) Elle prenait le temps de boire un coup elle aussi, la grande, avant de répondre, pensant que le liquide allait lui libérer la gorge. **que dalle!** Sans effet. De la tête elle pouvait juste faire : non ! non ! non ! (Frantext – A. Simonin, *Du mouroin pour les petits oiseaux*, 1960)

<sup>12</sup>In this use, it seems corresponding to low words used as a term of abuse (e.g. *putain*), often without reference to proper meaning.

<sup>13</sup>*Que dalle* combines the different nuances of negation and opposition in its use. Although it is generally used as a "forclusif" (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1927) to introduce a total negation, we find here a use as "discordantiel" expressing an opposition, a contradiction or a divergence from another proposition.

'She took the time to have a drink too, the big one, before answering, thinking that the liquid would free her throat. But no! Without effect. With her head she could just say: no! Nope ! Nope !'

Regarding the *ne*-deletion variable, we can keep it very short: *ne*-deletion is already present in the corpus moderne (67%) and today a clear tendency to drop *ne* can indeed be established (84% in corpus contemporain).

Finally, the analysis of the lexical verb confirms that the expression *que dalle* is particularly frequent with cognition verbs, value verbs, verbs of perception and existence (Esnault 1966:221; Cellard and Rey 1991:263). Table 4 presents the complete list<sup>14</sup> of verbs with *que dalle*, grouped by lexical field. The residual category contains verbs that occur only once and could not be placed anywhere else. The analysis nevertheless shows that the paradigm of the lexical verb is much richer and cannot be limited to the verbs expressing the forementioned categories. Verbs belonging to other lexical fields, i.e. Communication, Activity, Change, Give can also cooccur with *que dalle*.

Table 4 : Verb categories cooccurring with *que dalle*

Category	N per category (ordered)	Verbs (#)
<b>Cognition</b>	52 (38%)	apprendre (1), capter (1), comprendre (11), connaitre (6), entraver (13), étudier (1), panner (1), penser (1), piger (12), savoir (5)
<b>Value</b>	26 (19%)	avoir (8), coûter (1), payer (1), rapporter (2), réduire à (1), reposer sur (1), tenir pour (1), valoir (11)
<b>Perception</b>	22 (16%)	entendre (4), voir (18)
<b>Existence</b>	17 (13%)	être dans (1), être (10), il y a (5), rester (1)
<b>Communication</b>	6 (4%)	crier (1), dire (3), moufter (1), murmurer (1)
<b>Residual</b>	5 (4%)	attendre (1), dégauchir (1), être complice de (1), mettre (1), pouvoir (1)
<b>Activity</b>	4 (3%)	chauffer (1), faire de la peine pour (1), foutre (1), voleter pour (1)
<b>Change</b>	2 (1%)	changer (1), révolutionner pour (1)
<b>Give</b>	2 (1%)	donner (1), livrer pour (1)

## 5. Comparison between *que dalle* and *rien*

Now that we have described the different structures of *que dalle* we can examine in more detail the possible substitutions and combinations compared to *rien*. On the paradigmatic axis, we note that *que dalle* can replace *rien* in most distributional contexts, even in the most idiomatic ones like in (30). In the expression *trois fois rien/ que dalle*, nothing becomes something you can buy at a low price.

<sup>14</sup>The list contains the verbs from the dependent structure of which the internal structure is often elliptical in nature. Consequently, only 136 verbs could be listed with certainty.

- (30) Les initiés ont vite fait d'entraver que ce soir, c'est la fête. Ses pipeuses avaleront la fumée pour trois fois **que dalle...** J' ai pas perso une grosse camaradité pour Bernard.

(Frantext – J.-L. Degaudenzi, *Zone*, 1987)

'The insiders are quick to hinder that tonight is the party. His girls will swallow the smoke for three times nothing... I don't personally have a big comradeship for Bernard.'

On the syntagmatic axis, we observe that unlike *rien*, *que dalle* can function as an adjective (31). As a subject, it cannot occur in sentence-initial position (32) and appears always in a repeated sequence with synonyms (33). Multiple synonyms, also in object NPs, can cooccur with *que dalle*: *rien*, *nib*, *nib de nib* (17), *zéro*, *foutu*, *macache*, *walou*, *nada*, *papate*, *schnoll*, *que couic*, *que fifre*, *que nenni*, *que pouic*, *que tchi*, *peau de balle* among others (34)<sup>15</sup>. Reduplication is typical of oral discourse and reinforces the intended meaning of zero quantification.

- (31) quelqu'un m'as braqué mon autoradio dans ma golf mais juste la radio .... aucune effraction pas de raye ni de bosses **que dalles** ....J'me suis trouvé con quand j'ai tél a la gendarmerie et que j'ai dit qu'ont m'avais volé la radio sans rien cassé ! (French Ten Ten Corpus)

'someone robbed my car radio in my golf but just the radio .... no break-in no scratches or bumps at all .... I thought I was stupid when I phoned the gendarmerie and that I said that they had stolen the radio from me without breaking anything!'

- (32) Rien/ ?**Que dalle** ne m'affole comme une culotte de peau blanche, moulant des cuisses nerveuses. (Frantext – O. Mirbeau, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, 1900)

'Nothing freaks me out like panties of white skin, molding nervous thighs.'

- (33) Contre mon gré, le sol s'est effondré sous mes pieds, Des larmes ont jailli de mes yeux, Et rien, Strictement rien, **Que dalle** en moi n'était capable de les retenir. (French Ten Ten Corpus)

'Against my will, the ground collapsed under my feet, Tears sprang from my eyes, And nothing, Strictly nothing, Nothing in me was able to hold them back.'

- (34) Puisque les résultats de la recherche se traduisaient par cette courte syllabe, nibe, à peine prolongée en bouche par le e muet, et que l'imbécile heureux avait chuchotée sans grand sentiment ni déception visibles, comme s'il avait murmuré macache ou ballepeau ou rien ou **que dalle**, ou tintin, des clous, des nèfles, histoire de montrer l' étendue du vocabulaire d'Apache qui permet de signifier qu' on a fait chou blanc (Frantext – J.-C. Baudroux, *La même Caillou*, 2005)

<sup>15</sup>The synonyms can be pronouns, but often they are nouns: "Seule, la parlure plébéienne peut se contenter de l'ancienne idée si peu subtile, qui suffit à la mathématique, des succédanés comme *pouic*, *dal*, *nib*, *la peau*, *peau de zébie*, *peau de balle*, qui ne gouvernent point le discordantiel, c'est-à-dire ne demandent point *ne* auprès du verbe. Mais ce sont des substantifs strumentaux ou strumenteux (Damourette and Pichon 1911–1927: 462). 'Only plebeian speech can be satisfied with the old, so unsubtle idea, which is sufficient for mathematics, substitutes like *pouic*, *dal*, *nib*, *la peau*, *peau de zébie*, *peau de balle*, which do not govern the discordantial, that is to say do not require *ne* near the verb. But these are instrumental or strumentous nouns.'

‘Since the results of the search were translated by this short syllable, nibe, barely prolonged in the mouth by the silent e, and that the happy imbecile had whispered without much visible feeling or disappointment, as if he had murmured *macache* or *ballepeau* or *rien* or *que dalle*, or *tintin, des clous, des nèfles*, just to show the extent of Apache’s vocabulary which allows one to signify that one has drawn a blank’

**Table 5.** Functions of *rien* vs. *que dalle*

		<i>RIEN</i>	<i>QUE DALLE</i>
Syntax	Subject in sentence initial position	+	–
	Direct object	+	+
	Prepositional phrase	+	+
	Subject complement	+	+
	Post-determined by a PP	+	+
	Noun with masculine determiner	+	+
	Attributive adjective	–	+
	Word phrase	+	+
	<i>Ne</i> -deletion	+	+
Semantics	Meaning	negative pronoun (‘nothing’)	negative pronoun (‘nothing’)
	Referent	non-animated	non-animated
Stylistics	Register	formal and informal	informal
Pragmatics	Fragment answer	<i>Rien du tout !</i>	<i>Rien du tout !</i>
			<i>Non/pas du tout !</i>

Semantically, *que dalle* denotes a strong sense of zero quantification. As a pragmatic marker, *que dalle* is used in vernacular language for emphasis conveying a sense of informality and making the speaker’s tone more conversational or expressive. As such, it often carries a connotation of indignation (27), refusal, or emphasis of zero quantification (29). *Rien* can also relate to this but not to negation in terms of ‘non/ pas du tout’ as *que dalle* does in (28). Table 5 summarizes the functions of *rien* versus *que dalle* in modern French. A lot of functions agree, but *que dalle* differs from *rien* in terms of syntax (subject position, attributive adjective), stylistics and pragmatics.

## 6. The evolution of *que dalle*

Our analysis has shown so far that there is a clear functional convergence between *que dalle* and *rien* but there exist also some substantial differences between both. Before analysing the evolution of *que dalle*, we discuss some important observations in what follows.

A first observation is that the earliest attestation of *que dalle* is a fairly recent phenomenon. According to Esnault (1966:221), the expression *que dalle* is derived from *que le dail* of which the first attestation dates from 1829 (35). Coincidentally, the first example in the Frantext dataset is the same (36)<sup>16</sup> since Victor Hugo integrates this first attestation in *Les Misérables* six decades later. V. Hugo himself supplies the translation of the direct speech/argot part in standard French in note on the same page (37). Note that *que le dail* is already translated as a standard negation (*ne...pas*). We haven't found any attestation with bare noun *dail* in our corpus.

- (35) Je n'entrave **que le dail** comment le Daron des orgues, qui, bonnit-on, a tous ses mômes et momignards à la bonne, peut, comme un attigeur, les riffauder et locher leurs criblements sans être attigé lui-même. (N.N, *Mémoires d'un forban philosophe*, 1829).
- (36) À peine réclame-t-il, il se borne à soupirer ; un de ses gémissments est venu jusqu'à nous : – Je n'entrave **que le dail** comment meck, le daron des orgues, peut atiger ses mômes et ses momignards et les locher criblant sans être atigé lui-même. (Frantext – V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Tome IV, 1890:299)
- (37) Je ne comprends pas comment Dieu, le père des hommes, peut torturer ses enfants et ses petits-enfants et les entendre crier sans être torturé lui-même. 'I don't understand how God, the father of men, can torture his children and his grandchildren and hear them scream without being tortured himself.'

Unlike the expression *rien* which goes back to the old French period, it seems that the first attestation of the form *que dalle* does not take place until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Although some works already mention the form (Feist 1916:109; Leroy 1922:65), the first attestation in Frantext only dates from 1942. In Table 2, we see that the ratio in the contemporary corpus is very different to that of the modern corpus. The frequency of *que dalle* has considerably increased and it is nowadays a common informal n-word for which we can currently find numerous spellings on the internet: *que dal*, *que dale*, *quedalle*, *quedal*, *queud*, *queude*, *qu'dalle*, *keud*, *keude*, *keudalle*, *kedal*, *dalle*, *dal*.

A second point concerns the origin of the element *que*. It seems obvious that *que dalle* originates in the exceptive<sup>18</sup> structure *ne...que* ('only'), exemplified in (38). In this structure, the element *que* can introduce different post-verbal constituents, i.e. object, subject complement, PP, sequence of a presentative construction, and sequence of an impersonal construction (Riegel et al. 1994:413). Semantically, the exceptive combines a positive meaning made possible by the conjunction *que* (equivalent to *uniquement* 'except') and a negative meaning carried by the element *ne*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>The italics of the direct speech/argot part in (36) are original.

<sup>17</sup>See also the online Google books N-gram Viewer.

<sup>18</sup>Often called « restrictive or exceptive negation» (Baciu 1978 ; Riegel et al. 1994), *ne...que* is strictly speaking no negation. In line with the Anglo-Saxon literature (e.g. O'Neill 2011; Homer 2015; Authier and Reed 2022), we speak henceforth of "exceptives".

<sup>19</sup>For the history of the exceptive structure, see Moignet (1959:172ff.), who points out that the syntax of *ne...que* underwent a remarkable evolution in the 17th century. Specifically, the negative element *ne* was extended to *ne...pas* and other negations. For instance, *Ils ne répondent point que par monosyllabes* would have meant *Ils ne répondent que par monosyllabes* ('They only answer in monosyllables').

- (38) Elle **ne** vient **qu'**une heure.  
'She only comes for an hour.'

However, the corpus lacks examples indicating a first phase with *dalle* and an exceptive structure. In (39), the element *que* is functional but for another reason.

- (39) L' optimiste dit : ça vaut mieux *que dalle*. (Frantext – R. Fallet, *Carnets de jeunesse*, 1947)  
'The optimist says: it's better than nothing.'

In theory, the structure should be \**ça vaut mieux que que dalle* with the first *que* as functional part of the comparative *mieux que* 'better than' and the second as the empty *que* of lexicalized *que dalle*. However, this structure is ungrammatical and we note that they both have fused into one *que*, probably for reasons of economy or euphony. Today, the *que* element in *que dalle* has completely lost its grammatical function as part of an exceptive structure. The contrast between the *ne...que* structure and *que dalle* is reflected in (40). It has been widely assumed in the literature (e.g. Gross 1977:90; Gaatone 1999:106) that exceptive *que* can never follow a preposition (*ne...\*prep. que* + NP) unlike the structure with *que dalle* which forms a lexicalized entity.

- (40) Une mode comme une autre, un romantisme néo-néo !... Tout ça **ne** repose, horreurs, révolte, délire, **que sur** des lectures ... **sur que dalle** en définitive. (Frantext – A. Boudard, *La Cerise*, 1963)  
'A fashion like any other, a neo-neo romanticism!... All that rests, horrors, revolt, delirium, only on readings... on nothing in the end.'

If, for the time being, we nevertheless retain the hypothesis that *que dalle* originates in the exceptive structure, how do we get from a *ne...que dalle* with exceptive meaning to *ne...que dalle* as n-word? Based on Table 1, i.e. the evolution of French clause negation with quantifiers (Hansen, 2013:67), the development of *que dalle* would follow a similar pathway (Table 6) where the element *que* is an exceptive conjunction in the beginning: *ne...que le dail*. Through reanalysis the element *que* is no longer associated to the preverbal particle *ne*, but to the noun that follows. The meaning evolves from positive (restriction) to negative ('nothing').

The application of Table 1 presented in Table 6 looks pretty artificial because of the focus on form rather than on meaning. With a focus on meaning, the evolution of the expression *que dalle* can be refined as follows:

1. The exceptive meaning (*ne.que*) is accompanied by a positive NP with determiner (*le dail*) designating a small quantity or insignificant thing.
2. Reanalysis of *que* which agglutinates to the noun that follows and loses its autonomous function and its meaning.
3. Lexicalization of *que* with the bare modified noun *dalle* into *que dalle*. At the same time, the entire structure *que dalle* is recategorized as an indefinite pronoun with a negative meaning ('nothing'). The status is now this of an n-word which is optionally accompanied by preverbal *ne*.
4. Autonomous use of *que dalle* as pragmatic marker in the sense of 'no, nothing at all'.

**Table 6.** The evolution of *que dalle*

Stage	Structure
Stage 1	Ne... [que]/ le dail
Stage 2	Ne.../[que (le) dail]
Stage 3	(Ne)...[ <i>que dalle</i> ]
Stage 4	[ <i>Que dalle!</i> ]

A first process of language change to be discussed is lexicalization, i.e. the process of adding new words or word patterns to the language's lexicon as a result of various mechanisms, such as borrowing, compounding, abbreviation, blending, or conventionalization of phrases (Brinton and Traugott 2005). The lexical structure *dalle*, belonging to the major category of nouns and having a general, almost generic (see introduction) semantics is predisposed to language change. As a matter of fact, the *que* loses its functional exceptive value and merges with the bare noun *dalle* to form the lexicalized expression *que dalle*. Lexicalized elements beginning with *que* are very rare in French and, to our knowledge, limited to a number of other colloquial expressions as *que couic*, *que fifre*, *que pouic*,<sup>20</sup> and *que tchi*. The expression *que dalle* is used from the start in rather conventionalized sequences with a reduced number of verb types, e.g. cognitive verbs (*comprendre*, *entraver*, *piger*, etc.).<sup>21</sup>

A second parallel process of language change is that of grammaticalization, i.e. the process of developing new grammatical elements or functions from existing words or phrases. It usually involves a shift from a more concrete and lexical meaning to a more abstract and grammatical one, as well as a reduction in form and autonomy. In this particular case, the bare noun *dalle* has lost its morphosyntactic features and is, together with *que*, grammaticalized into the pronoun *que dalle*. The desemanticization consists of the change from its original lexical meaning, i.e. a small quantity, to 'nothing (at all)'. This process usually occurs with erosion, i.e. the loss of phonological substance. We can currently find several spellings on the internet which shows that the erosion is still continuing. The original preverbal element becomes optional (84% of *ne*-deletion in corpus contemporain) because its

<sup>20</sup>Example extracted from our corpus :

(i) Des proies de rêve ! Elles matent **que pouic**, entendent que dalle... (*Frantext* – J.-L. Degaudenzi, *Zone*, 1987)  
'Dream prey! They see nothing, hear nothing...'

<sup>21</sup>A similar lexicalized expression with a cognitive verb and an exceptive structure can also be found in German (i). Thanks to Achim Stein (personal communication) for pointing this out to us.

(i) Ich verstehe nur Bahnhof.  
I understand only railway station  
'I don't understand anything at all.'



status is that of an agreement marker. The number of verb categories involved increases and other lexical fields like Change and Give are integrated into the paradigm. Based on the diachronic Frantext dataset we cannot state that the evolution of *que dalle* is identical to that of *rien*: (i) *que dalle* can be used as an adjective, e.g. (20); (ii) *que dalle* cannot be used as a noun. However, today's TenTenCorpus might be indicative of a changing situation since there are already some attested instances of *que dalle* as a masculine noun, e.g. (21); (iii) as subject, *que dalle* only occurs in a post-verbal position, more precisely in a repetition, e.g. (17). As such, the absence of preverbal use could indicate that *que dalle* is less advanced on the path to becoming a negative word, as is the case for NPIs (Larivière and Kallel 2020). Note that the positional difference between *rien* and *que dalle* is observed not only in sentence-initial position (41) but also in intermediate position (42). We argue that the limited syntactic mobility of *que dalle* is due to its lesser degree of grammaticalization. However, alternative explanations cannot be ruled out. The fact that *que dalle* cannot move to the sentence-initial position might also be explained by its historical origin in the exceptive structure (43), as the *que* must remain under the scope of sentential negation.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the mobility deficit could simply be a matter of the weight or length of the lexical unit *que dalle*, since French syntax generally disallows longer expressions from being inserted between the auxiliary and the participle.

- (41) Rien/ \*Que dalle n'a été fait aujourd'hui.  
'Nothing was done today.'
- (42) Je n'ai rien/\*que dalle mangé aujourd'hui.  
'I haven't eaten anything today.'
- (43) a. Il ne boira qu'une bière.  
'He will only drink one beer.'
- b.\*Qu'une bière il ne boira.  
'Only one beer he will drink.'

Due to its grammaticalization, the frequency of *que dalle* is increasing, and its distribution is expanding to new contexts. As such the use of *que dalle* in contemporary discourse align with several features commonly attributed to pragmatic markers as outlined by Brinton (2017:9). Syntactically, *que dalle* often operates outside the main syntactic structure, as in fragment answers or exclamations (Stage 4). Functionally, *que dalle* can be defined as multifunctional, i.e. it serves various pragmatic purposes. The pragmatic marker undergoes subjectification<sup>23</sup> which leads to other more expressive meanings e.g. refusal, indignation. Detges and Waltereit

<sup>22</sup>The exceptive is possible in intermediate position, but then the scope and meaning are different. Compare:

- (i) On n'a **qu'**évoqué cet incident.  
'This incident was only mentioned'
- (ii) On n'a évoqué **que** cet incident.  
'Only this incident was mentioned.'

<sup>23</sup>To be defined here in terms of Traugott (2010:32), viz the encoding of speaker's attitude or viewpoint (subjectivity) to what is said.

(2002:178) suggest that the change from a noun denoting a small quantity functioning as a Negative Polarity Item to a marker of emphatic negation must have taken place in contexts such as “critical statements and accusations that the speaker has to counteract”, like it is the case in (27). Finally, *que dalle* also exhibits sociolinguistic and stylistic features associated with pragmatic markers (Brinton 2017:9). It is characteristic of spoken French and is rarely encountered in formal written texts, except when used for stylistic effect in dialogue, as seen in the Frantext corpus. The expression is salient in informal oral and online conversations (e.g., the TenTen Corpus), where its emphatic tone and colloquial flavour are especially prominent. Whether its use is age- or gender-specific remains to be investigated.

## 7. Discussion

The evolution of *que dalle* as outlined above is definitely a hypothetical one that involves a number of methodological and theoretical issues that warrant discussion. First, a methodological limitation is that there exists no evidence for stages 1 and 2 in the Frantext corpus. Perhaps it is possible that the first stages still took place in the oral register and that there is therefore no written proof at all. At the moment there is no certainty about that. Second, it turns out not to be a gradual process from start to finish, at least that is what we observe in our diachronic corpus. While we would expect stage 4 only after a period of conventionalization, it appears simultaneously with stage 3 in the corpus moderne (Table 3). We could hypothesize that the actualization process of *que dalle* as a pragmatic marker is ongoing and that would confirm the assumption that changes are always manifested in synchronic variation (i.e. in *gradience*<sup>24</sup>). However, the analysis is complicated by the fact that both structures arise at the same time and that the pragmatic marker is on the decrease in the Frantext corpus (Table 3). A reviewer rightly notes that the simultaneity observed in literary material does not necessarily reflect the occurrence of events in spoken language. Consequently, more data from other corpora is needed to further investigate the intersection between synchronic and diachronic variation. Third, on a theoretical level and in relation with typology, we know that indefinite pronouns can arise from different kinds of source constructions (Haspelmath 1997; Breitbarth et al. 2020). Many languages use generic nouns like ‘person’, ‘thing’, ‘place’, ‘time’, etc. to express notions like ‘someone’, ‘something’, ‘somewhere’, ‘sometime’, etc. and the diachronic process by which a generic noun is turned into an indefinite pronoun is quite straightforward. However, the evolution of an indefinite pronoun out of a noun with generic properties (defining a small quantity) in combination with an exceptive expression is a special phenomenon. We have seen (section 2) that *rien* evolves from polarity item to n-word. In a similar way and with respect to the exceptive expression *ne...que*, we hypothesize that *dalle* was initially an NPI which, in combination with *que*, formed the n-word *que dalle*, and now independently conveys negative meaning. As an n-word, *que dalle* corresponds to all the micro-steps defined by Larrivée (2021): *que dalle* functions in fragment answers (29), can be used in double negation (24), and in constituent negation contexts (18). The absence of preverbal use might be

<sup>24</sup>Following Traugott and Trousdale (2010), we distinguish *gradience* as a synchronic phenomenon, and *gradualness* as a diachronic one.

explained by the possibility that *que dalle* remains connected to its NPI origin. In his 2011 paper, Larrivée challenges the existence of a Jespersen's cycle, arguing that most of the items in question do not follow a systematic syntactic evolution through successive stages leading back to an original non-negative state. Instead, these items transition along a continuum of ordered functions and possibly environments. This, he suggests, explains why individual items can combine multiple functions and why the back-formation of negative polarity functions is possible.

Finally, there is no doubt that the development of *que dalle* is different from that of *rien* in that it tends towards inherent negativity in fragment answers. Like *rien*, *que dalle* can be interpreted as a standard negation, meaning *ne...pas*, in a non-argumental use, e.g. example (23) repeated here in (44).<sup>25</sup> However, in contrast to *rien*, *que dalle* can also function as an adverb of negation in fragment answers, meaning *non!* or *pas du tout!*, e.g. examples (4), (28), and (45). This emphatic negation appears to represent an extension of its pragmatic use.

- (44) La 11 à New York avec cette bagnole de merde qui freine **que dalle**, j'en ai vraiment eu horreur. (French Ten Ten Corpus)  
'I really hated the 11 in New York with that crappy car that doesn't brake at all...'
- (45) CLAIRE Pense au ciel. Pense au ciel. Pense à ce qu'il y a après.  
'Think of the sky. Think of the sky. Think about what's next.'  
SOLANGE **Que dalle!** J'en ai assez de m'agenouiller sur des bancs à l'église, j'aurais eu le velours rouge des abbesses ou la pierre des pénitentes, mais au moins, noble serait mon attitude. (Frantext - J. Genet, *Les Bonnes*, 1959)  
'No! I'm tired of kneeling on benches in church, I would have had the red velvet of the abbesses or the stone of the penitents, but at least my attitude would be noble.'

## 8. Conclusion

The present study constitutes a first contribution to the understanding of the French pronoun *que dalle* ('nothing'). First, we looked at its syntactic flexibility, its semantic strength in conveying zero quantification, and its pragmatic role in informal language. Then we compared *que dalle* with its near synonym *rien* and analysed its development. The results can be summarized as follows. On a descriptive level, we can conclude that, in spite of their different diaphasic distribution, *que dalle* functions in much the same way as *rien*, but the former differs from the latter in terms of syntax (subject position, attributive adjective), stylistics and especially pragmatics. On a methodological level, we hypothesized that *que dalle* originates in the exceptive structure *ne...que* ('only') but the corpus data were insufficient to demonstrate this assumption. On a theoretical level, different processes, i.e. lexicalization and grammaticalization, could be distinguished. We acknowledge that

<sup>25</sup>See Bayer (2009) who explores negative quantifiers, particularly *nothing*, in non-argumental positions in English, German, Dutch, and Italian. In these contexts, it behaves adverbially and triggers a strengthened negative reading similar to NPIs. Negative quantifiers originated as NPIs before becoming primary markers of sentential negation. In modern languages, their NPI-like behaviour resurfaces in specific syntactic contexts. Bayer concludes that nominal negative quantifiers like *nothing* have a dual nature: they serve as carriers of negation in argument positions but can function as NPIs when their argumental role is absent.

individual quantifiers can be very different in nature and have different diachronic paths: the development of *que dalle* differs from that of *rien* in its postverbal use, and it tends toward inherent negativity in fragment answers. We can generally conclude that the past end of its evolution is still loose and in need of further investigation, whereas the current end is quite neat with already several differences in comparison to the path of its near synonym *rien*.

**Competing interests.** The author(s) declare none.

## References

- Anscombre, J. C. (2018). Le *que* médiatif du français contemporain. Perspectives diachronique et comparée. *Revue Romane*, 53(2), 181–216.
- Armstrong, N., and Smith, A. (2002). The influence of linguistic and social factors on the recent decline of French *ne*. *Journal of French Language Studies*, 12(1), 23–41.
- Ashby, B. (1981). The loss of the negative particle *ne* in French : a syntactic change in progress. *Language*, 57, 674–687.
- ATILF. Base textuelle Frantext (En ligne). ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine. 1998–2022. <https://www.frantext.fr/> (data retrieved in 2023).
- Authier, J. M., and Reed, L. A. (2022). French *ne* ... *que* *exceptives* in prepositional contexts. In G. Alboiu (Ed.), Points of Convergence in Romance Linguistics Papers selected from the 48th Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages (LSRL 48), Toronto, 25–28 April 2018 (Vol. 360, pp. 163–175). Amsterdam – New York: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Baciu, I. (1978). La négation restrictive. *Le Français Moderne*, 46, 135–142.
- Bayer, J. (2009). Nominal negative quantifiers as adjuncts. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*, 12(1), 5–30.
- Blanche-Benveniste, C., Bilger, M., Rouget, C., Mertens, P., and Willems, D. (1990). *Le français parlé : études grammaticales*. Paris : CNRS.
- Bolinger, D. (1972). *Degree Words*. The Hague: De Gruyter.
- Bréal, M. (1904). *Essai de sémantique : science des significations* (3e éd. rev., corr. et augm. ed.). Paris : Hachette.
- Breitbart, A., Lucas, C., and Willis, D. W. E. (2020). *The history of negation in the languages of Europe and the Mediterranean. Volume II: Patterns and Processes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brinton, L. J. (2017). *The evolution of pragmatic markers in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brinton, L. J., & Traugott, E. C. (2005). *Lexicalization and language change*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Cellard, J., and Rey, A. (1991). *Dictionnaire du français non conventionnel* (2e éd., revue et augmentée ed.). Paris: Hachette.
- Covey, A. (1996). *Variability in spoken French. A sociolinguistic study of Interrogation and negation*. Exeter: Elm Bank Publications.
- Dahl, Ö. (1979). Typology of sentence negation. *Linguistics*, 17, 79–106.
- Damourette, J. and Pichon, E. (1911–1927). *Des mots à la pensée. Essai de grammaire de la langue française*. Paris: Éd. D'Artry.
- Detges, U., & Waltereit, R. (2002). Reanalysis vs. Grammaticalization: A semantic-pragmatic account of functional change in grammar. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 21, 151–195.
- Duneton, C. (2014), *La Puce à l'oreille : anthologie des expressions populaires avec leur origine*. Paris : Le Livre de Poche.
- Sketch Engine, French Ten Ten Corpus [https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/\(data](https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/(data) retrieved in 2023).
- Esnault, G. (1966). *Dictionnaire historique des argots français*. Paris: Larousse.
- Feist, S. (1916). Vermischtes. *Die Neuen Sprachen. Zeitschrift für dem neusprachlichen Unterricht, Band XXIV*(2), 104–112.
- Foulet, L. (1977). *Petite syntaxe de l'ancien français* (3e éd. rev. ed.). Paris : Champion.

- Gaatone, D.** (1999). *Réflexions sur la syntaxe de ne ... que*. In M. Plénat, M. Aurnague, A. Condamines, J.-P. Maurel, C. Molinier, and C. Muller (Eds.), *L'emprise du sens. Structures linguistiques et interprétations. Mélanges de syntaxe et de sémantique offerts à Andrée Borillo par un groupe d'amis, de collègues et de disciples* (pp. 101–115). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Gaston, D.** (2016). *Le pourquoi et le comment des expressions françaises : petit inventaire insolite pour les amoureux de la langue française*. Paris : Larousse.
- George, K. E. M.** (1970). Formules de négation et de refus en français populaire et argotique. *Français Moderne*, 38, 307–314.
- Giannakidou, A.** (1998). *Polarity sensitivity as (non)veridical dependency*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Giannakidou, A.** (2006). *n-words and negative concord*. In: Everaert, M., Riemsdijk, H., van, (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Syntax*, vol. III, chap. 45, pp. 327–391. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gross, M.** (1977). *Grammaire transformationnelle du français : syntaxe du nom*. Paris: Larousse.
- Hansen, A. and Malderez, I.** (2004). *Le ne en région parisienne: Une étude en temps réel*. *Langage et société*, 107, 5–30.
- Hansen, M.-B. M.** (2011). *Viviane Déprez: "Atoms of negation. An outside-in micro-parametric approach to negative concord."* Discussion. In P. Larrivée, and Ingham, R. (Ed.), *The Evolution of Negation. Beyond the Jespersen Cycle* (pp. 273–283). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Hansen, M.-B. M.** (2013). *Negation in the history of French*. In D. Willis, C. Lucas, A. Breitbarth, A. Ledgeway, and I. Roberts (Eds.), *The History of Negation in the Languages of Europe and the Mediterranean: Vol. I: Case Studies (Vol. Oxford Studies in Diachronic and Historical Linguistics; Vol. 5, pp. 51–76)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, M.-B. M.** (2020). *La négation de proposition*. In C. Marchello-Nizia, B. Combettes, S. Prévost, and T. Scheer (Eds.), *Grande grammaire historique du français* (pp. 1679–1694). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Haspelmath, M.** (1997). *Indefinite pronouns*. Oxford: Clarendon press.
- Hoeksema, J.** (2001). Rapid change among expletive polarity items. In J. Brinton (Ed.), *Historical Linguistics 1999: Selected papers from the 14th International Conference on Historical Linguistics* (pp. 175–186). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hoeksema, J.** (2002). Minimaliseerders in het Standaardnederlands. *Tabu*, 32, 105–174.
- Homer, V.** (2015). *Ne ... que and its challenges*. In T. B. Ulrike Steindl, Huilin Fang, Alfredo García Pardo, Peter Guekguezian, Brian Hsu, Charlie O'Hara, and Iris Chuoying Ouyang (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 32nd West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics (WCCFL 32)* (pp. 111–120). Somerville, MA: Cascadia Proceedings Project.
- Hopper, P. J., & Traugott, E. C.** (2003). *Grammaticalization* (Repr., 2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jespersen, O.** (1917). *Negation in English and other languages*. København : Høst.
- Kilgariff, A., Baisa V., Bušta J., Jakubiček M., Kovář V., Michelfeit J., Rychlý P. and Suchomel V.** (2014). The Sketch Engine: Ten years on. *Lexicography*, 1(1) : 7–36.
- Labelle, M. and Espinal, M. T.** (2014). Diachronic changes in negative expressions: The case of French. *Lingua*, 145, 194–225.
- Larrivée, P.** (2011). Is there a Jespersen cycle? In Larrivée P. and R. Ingham (Eds.), *The Evolution of Negation* (pp. 1–22). Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Larrivée, P.** (2021). Turning negative: micro-steps from negative polarity item to negative-word. *Language Sciences*, 85.
- Larrivée, P. and Kallel, A.** (2020). The empirical reality of bridging contexts Strong polarity contexts as the transition between NPIs and n-words. *Journal of Historical Linguistics*, 10(3), 427–451.
- Lebesque, M.** (1970). *Comment peut-on être breton ?*. Paris : Seuil.
- Lehmann, C.** (2015). *Thoughts on grammaticalization*. Third edition. Classics in Linguistics, 1. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Leroy, O.** (1922). *A glossary of French slang*. London: G. G. Harrap.
- Marchello-Nizia, C., Combettes, B., Prévost, S. and Scheer, T.** (2020). *Grande Grammaire Historique du Français (GGHF)*. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton.
- Martin, R.** (1966). *Le mot «rien» et ses concurrents en français (du XIVe siècle à l'époque contemporaine)*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Martineau, F. and Déprez, V.** (2004). Pas-rien/pas-aucun in classical French: Dialectal and historical variation. *Langue Francaise*, 143, 33–47.

- Meisner, C.** (2016). *La variation pluridimensionnelle : une analyse de la négation en français*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Moignet, G.** (1959). *Les signes de l'exception dans l'histoire du français*. Genève : Droz.
- Muller, C.** (1991). *La négation en français : syntaxe, sémantique et éléments de comparaison avec les autres langues romanes*. Genève : Droz.
- Narrog, H. and Heine, B.** (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Neill, T.** (2011). The Syntax of *ne...que* exceptives in French. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*, 17(1), 175–184.
- Pusch, C. D.** (2015). *Que-relles – Descriptions et emplois variés du morphème conjonctif que en français: un tour d'horizon*. In G. Dostie and P. Hadermann (Eds.), *La dia-variation en français actuel. Etudes sur corpus, approches croisées et ouvrages de référence*. (pp. 13–38). Bern: Lang.
- Riegel, M., Pellat, J.-C., and Rioul, R.** (1994). *Grammaire méthodique du français*. Paris: PUF.
- Robert, P., Rey-Debove, J., and Rey, A.** (2018). *Le petit Robert : dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Nouvelle édition millésime ed.). Paris: Le Robert.
- Sarré, N.** (2003). Diachronie des pronoms indéfinis à base nominale du moyen français au français classique: Les rémanences d'un emploi nominal à travers un emploi pronominal. *Revue de Linguistique romane*, 67(265–266), 117–136.
- Traugott, E. C.** (2010). (Inter)subjectivity and (inter)subjectification: A reassessment. In K. Davidse, L. Vandelandotte, and H. Cuyckens (Eds.), *Subjectification, Intersubjectification and Grammaticalization* (pp. 29–74). Berlin-New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Traugott, E. C., and Trousdale, G.** (2010). *Gradience, gradualness and grammaticalization. How do they intersect?* In E. C. Traugott and G. Trousdale (Eds.), *Gradience, gradualness and grammaticalization* (pp. 19–44). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Vernet, F.** (2007). *Que dalle! Quand l'argot parle occitan*, Institut d'études occitanes (Institut d'estudis occitans): Limoges.
- von Wartburg, W.** (1948). *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch : eine Darstellung des galloromanischen Sprachschatzes*. Basel: Zbinden.