The syntax and semantics of a determiner system: A case study of Mauritian Creole.


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Mauritian Creole (MC) is a French lexifier creole with Kwa and Bantu substrate languages. In the early nineteenth century MC lost the French determiners le/la ‘the’ and du (partitive ‘some’), often incorporating them into the noun stems, and became, in stark contrast to French, a language that allows bare count and mass nouns in argument positions. Diana Guillemin’s book is dedicated to the documentation and theoretical analysis of that change, as well as the new system of determiners and quantifiers that subsequently emerged in MC. G is a native speaker of MC, but the study is primarily corpus-based, with over eighty text sources, ranging from eighteenth-century documents to Baissac’s (1880, 1888) collections to recent internet posts. The analysis is carried out using current formal semantic and generative syntactic theories.

The interest of the work is manifold. One of the highlights is the study of specificity vs. definiteness in a language that lacks an overt definite article. MC diverges from its lexifier and resembles its substrate languages, which have been observed to mark specificity, rather than definiteness. To illustrate, consider the example in 1 (simplified from ex. 22 on p. 125): bare count nouns may be interpreted either as indefinite or as definite by virtue of uniqueness, but postnominal là serves to encode anaphoric definiteness, which G qualifies as [+definite, +specific]. As G notes, ‘The use of là serves to recall the topic, and once it is established that lacorde is the subject of the discourse, a bare noun can be used again’ (125).

(1) Alle cace to lacorde, … Baleine amarre lacorde dans … so laquée …
    go fetch 2SG.POSS rope whale tie rope in 3.SG.POSS tail

Lacorde là vine raide … Lacorde péte éne coup!
    rope SP become stiff rope snap one time

‘The rope stiffens … The rope suddenly snaps!’

Ch. 1, ‘Sources of Mauritian Creole’, is a brief introduction to the origins of MC and an outline of the work. Ch. 2, ‘Introduction’, introduces the early changes from French to MC and the new determiner system. In addition to the above-mentioned loss or incorporation of the French determiners, MC lost the French copula and the case-assigning prepositions à ‘to, for’ and de ‘of’, giving rise to a massive [+/-definite] and [+/-plural] ambiguity in argumental bare nouns. The new determiner system includes the indefinite singular marker enn, the postnominal specificity marker là, the old demonstrative sa that is now in combination with là, the plural marker bann (from bande ‘group’) that is in complementary distribution with numerals, the phonetically null definite article notated as δ, and so, a possessive pronoun reanalyzed as an emphatic determiner, equivalent to the English and French definite articles in associative anaphoric contexts in terms of Hawkins 1978. The chapter situates the study within the minimalist program and the hypothesis of universal grammar, and points to its specific syntactic and semantic backgrounds.

Ch. 3, ‘Syntactic framework’, provides a general introduction to the assumptions broadly underlying minimalist syntax and lays out the architecture of the MC noun phrase. Following Chierchia’s (1998) argumental vs. predicative parameter for initial noun denotations, the major change in MC that enabled the occurrence of bare nouns in argument positions is a parametric switch from predicative to kind-denoting, argumental nouns. The noun phrase is assigned the following multilayered structure, from the bottom up: NP, NumP (headed by [+count] and hosting enn, bann, or numerals in its specifier), DemP (headed by [+deictic] and hosting sa in its specifier), PossP, DeP (with the null head δ), and finally, SpP (headed by [+specific] ∅ or là). Head movements (N-to-Num in count noun phrases, and N-to-Def in mass ones) will be followed by the
phrasal movement of NumP or DefP to the specifier of SpP, giving rise to the postnominal position of \( \text{à} \). DefP and SpP are phases, paralleling the clause-level phases vP and CP.

Ch. 4, ‘Semantics: Definitions and formalism’, first reviews theories of definiteness, familiarity, and specificity. SpP in MC encodes the presupposition of existence, or indefinite specificity, when headed by \( \emptyset \), and anaphoricity, or definite specificity, when headed by \( \text{à} \). Laying the groundwork for the claim that MC nouns are lexically stored as kinds, not as properties, the second part of the chapter reviews theories of kinds, the mass/count or bounded/intermediately structured distinction, and plurality, and goes on to introduce Partee’s (1986) theory of type shifting between entity, predicate, and generalized quantifier type denotations.

Ch. 5, ‘Early changes: From French to creole’, and Ch. 6, ‘The emergence of a new determiner system’, lay out the early changes and the emergence of the new determiner system. Ch. 7, ‘The modern MC determiner system’, continues with a rich, informal description of the distribution and interpretation of modern MC bare nouns and determiners. Each of chapters 5, 6, and 7 is beautifully documented in terms of multiple sources and systematic examination of all relevant grammatical environments, as well as the presentation of the individual examples. In each case G provides the MC example, its source, glosses, an idiomatic translation into English, and the French equivalent for comparison, and supplements the data with helpful tables. If readers so wish, they can go ahead and build their own grammar of MC noun phrases, based on these chapters.

Among other things, Ch. 7 observes that bare count nouns occur as singular definite subjects only if they function as proper nouns or have a unique referent in the context, but they occur with either definite or indefinite interpretations in direct and prepositional object positions; bare mass nouns can be either definite or indefinite even in subject position. The gap in the case of bare count nouns points to a semantically conditioned but ultimately syntactic issue. The specificity marker \( \text{à} \) that rescues count nouns in this gap then forces a singular interpretation but, unlike \( \text{enn} \) ‘one’, does not itself encode singular number: it occurs with plurals (\( \text{bann zanfan-la} \) ‘those children’, p. 177) and mass nouns (\( \text{disik-la} \) ‘that sugar’, p. 178). The default interpretation of MC bare nouns is plural, so G raises the question of why MC needs the plural marker \( \text{bann} \). \( \text{Bann} \) forces a definite reading on subject noun phrases and, unlike bare count nouns, cannot be used in a generic context.

The last third of the book, Chs. 8, 9, and 10, analyze the data in theoretical terms. Ch. 8, ‘Noun denotation and function of determiners’, proposes that a strong ARG[umental] feature, analogous to clause-level Agr, forces the raising of N to Def. Mass nouns, proper nouns, and unique nouns undergo such head movement. In contrast, other count nouns raise to Num; NumP needs a determiner to function as an argument. \( \delta \), being null, must be licensed by overt \( \text{à} \); G assumes that two null elements cannot form the appropriate syntactic relationship. G proposes that \( \delta \) represents the type shifter \( \text{THE} \), and \( \text{enn} \) and \( \text{bann} \) the type shifter \( \text{pred} \). In terms of Partee 1986, the former mapping type \( \langle \varepsilon, \tau \rangle \) to \( \langle \varepsilon, \varepsilon, \tau \rangle \) and the latter \( \langle \varepsilon \rangle \) to \( \langle \varepsilon, \tau \rangle \). Because \( \text{enn} \) and \( \text{bann} \) apply only to count nouns, mass nouns cannot be used predicatively. The MC analogue of \( \text{This ring is gold} \) is ungrammatical (221). The [+specific] interpretations of indefinites are induced by tense operators or quantificational adverbs (223). Through the agency of the zero copula, an MC bare count noun can function as a predicate when it denotes a role or a profession, as in French, when the subject is a singleton (cf. the type shifter \( \text{BE} \)). \( \text{Pol} \emptyset \text{peser} \) ‘Paul is a fisherman’ is grammatical, but *\( \text{Pol e Zak bann peser} \) is not; a different, demonstrative construction is required, \( \text{Pol e Zak bann peser sa} \emptyset \) ‘Paul and Jacques are fishermen’ (233–34). Ch. 9, ‘The syntax of the MC noun phrase’, spells out the head and phrasal movements mentioned above.

Ch. 10, ‘Conclusion’, formulates the conclusions and the significance for linguistic theory. It discusses the semantics of noun phrases in terms of denotation vs. reference, and highlights the distinction between definiteness and specificity and the proposal that ‘At least one of two elements that enters into a syntactic operation must be overt’ (290).

An exemplary feature of the book is its extremely clear (although somewhat repetitive) organization and the meticulous care with which both the data and the theoretical tools are introduced and traced to their sources. Although an original research contribution, the book can almost be
used as a textbook in the relevant areas, which not only is very helpful to its current readers but also will significantly extend its shelf life. In one respect it seems to deviate from the sources. Partee’s (1986) type shifters are not overt or null elements of the syntactic representation; they are operations that must be assumed in order to make sense of how certain sentences are coherent and mean what they do, despite the absence of any overt, or null but well-motivated, elements that those operations could be pinned on. It would be preferable to say that enn, bann, and their brothers have the same semantics as particular type shifters in Partee 1986, not that they are type shifters.

The data and the discussion of definiteness and specificity is an outstanding value of the book. G points to the Kwa and Bantu languages as ones that cut the cake the way MC does, but comparison with other languages that allow bare singulars to occur as arguments would also be most interesting. Some of those, such as Slavic languages, have no articles at all; others, like Hungarian and Hindi, have definite and/or indefinite articles. One hopes that the book under review will inspire a new wave of comparative studies, syntactic and semantic, in this area.

REFERENCES


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