

The Emergence of a Determiner System: The Case of Mauritian Creole

Abstract

Early in the genesis of Mauritian Creole (MC), the French definite articles (*le/la/les*) and partitive determiners (*du/des*), merged with nouns that they preceded, e.g.:

- Les fenêtres (the windows) → *lafnet* (window)
- Le roi (the king) → *lerwa* (king)
- Du monde (people) → *dumun/dimun* (person)

The immediate consequence was that all nouns were bare, yielding ambiguous interpretations between [±definite] singular and [±definite] plural.

Initially, awkward periphrastic constructions were used to express these semantic contrasts, but, over a period of approximately 150 years, new functional items emerged, namely:

- *enn* to mark [–definite] singular, derived from the French *un/une* (English 'a/an').
- *bann* to mark plural, derived from the French *une bande de* ('a group of'). It is unspecified for [±definiteness].
- *la* to mark specificity (or referentiality) on both singular and plural noun phrases. It is derived from the French locative adverb *là*.
- A phonologically null definite determiner which marks NPs in some argument positions.

The grammaticalization of these lexical items has yielded an effective and economical system of determiners, which are able to express, without redundancy, all the semantic features that could no longer be expressed in the early creole following the loss of the French determiners.

This process was accompanied by a change in their syntax, and this represents a significant divergence from the lexifier, namely:

- The occurrence of bare nouns in MC, while all nouns in French must have a determiner
- All determiners are pre-nominal in French, while MC has post nominal *la*.

I will present MC linguistic data from the mid 18th to the end of the 19th century, when the new determiner system settles into what is currently used in modern Mauritian Creole.

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