

IS REUNION CREOLE A “SEMI-CREOLE”? EVIDENCE FROM RELATIVE CLAUSES

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Abstract

This paper assesses the extent to which the relative system of Reunion Creole can be considered evidence for the “semi-creole” status of the language, which HOLM (1989, p. 392) has attributed to it. As a “semi-creole”, Reunion Creole is often left out of creole grammars such as that by SYEA (2017). This pilot study therefore begins to fill a typological gap in the literature, outlining the strategies used in headed relative clauses in the language. It compares these strategies against those used in French (its lexifier) and the other Indian Ocean Creoles. For subject and direct object relatives, it finds the relativising strategies closer to those of the “full” creoles of the Indian Ocean. In these positions, Reunion Creole employs a zero and gap or relativiser and gap strategy, at rates of roughly 80% and 20% respectively. The optional relativiser used is universal *ke*. Oblique relatives prefer a relativiser and gap strategy, and an additional relativiser, *ousa*, is found in locatives. These relatives thus exhibit some more similarity to French. Genitive relatives are found to prefer zero-marking and a pronoun retention strategy, therefore more closely resemble the Indian Ocean Creoles. However, the study also finds some evidence of a relative pronoun strategy with obliques and genitives. It thus highlights the need for further research to establish whether this strategy is in wider use, and whether this possible development of a relative pronoun strategy is an internal development or a result of language contact with French. If further research finds a relative pronoun strategy in wider use, it may support the “semi-creole” classification of Reunion Creole. However, the results of the present study suggest that the relative system of Reunion Creole resembles more closely that of the “full” creoles of the Indian Ocean than that of French.

1. Introduction

Reunion Creole (RC) is spoken on Reunion Island, an overseas department of France, located in the Indian Ocean. RC is an officially recognised regional language, spoken alongside French, the national language. The French-lexified creoles of Mauritius, Seychelles and Rodrigues are mutually intelligible and are often grouped together as the Indian Ocean Creoles (IOC). Labelled a “semi-creole” (HOLM, 1989, p. 392), RC is not included in this group and is often neglected from creole grammars such as that by SYEA (2017). This study begins to fill a typological gap in the literature, investigating the relativising strategies used in the language.

The paper proceeds with an outline of the research context, beginning with pidgin and creole languages. It then discusses the history and sociolinguistic context of RC before defining relative clauses and outlining how relativising strategies differ. This outline centres on the strategies used in French and the IOC, which act as points of comparison for assessing whether the relative system of RC is closer to that of the neighbouring “full” creoles, or to French. Section 3 describes the methodology and data used, Section 4 presents and discusses the results and Section 5 concludes. The paper shows that relativising strategies in RC vary depending on the grammatical role of the head in the relative clause. The relative system of RC exhibits simi-

larities to the “full” IOC; a universal optional relativiser, a gap strategy in subjects and direct objects and resumptive pronouns in genitive relative clauses. However, while the IOC require a resumptive pronoun in oblique relatives, RC employs a gap strategy. RC also has an additional relativiser for locative oblique relatives, *ousa*, resembling French *où*. The study finds some evidence of a relative pronoun strategy in oblique and genitive relative clauses. The data thus suggest that, while the relative system of RC closely resembles that of the neighbouring “full” creoles, it may be developing a relative pronoun strategy in some contexts. This may be a result of its contact with French, or an independent language change. The study therefore highlights the need for further research to investigate these questions.

2. Research context

Beginning with some definitions, a pidgin is a reduced language which arises when groups of speakers of different mother tongues have an urgent need to communicate for a prolonged period. Pidgins are reduced in the sense that they have small vocabularies and simplified grammatical rules because they are only used for basic communication in limited contexts (HOLM, 2000, p. 5). There is often an imbalance of power between the groups of speakers, meaning the majority of words used come from the language of the most powerful group. This language becomes the lexifier language, and the other input languages are known as substrate languages. Creole languages differ from pidgins in that they are the native language of a population of speakers. Typological similarities have been found in creole languages formed on opposite sides of the world, by speakers with different ancestral languages. For example, some typical features found in creole languages are a lack of inflection, no copula, SVO word order and a lack of gender distinction (ROMAINE, 1988). Creole genesis, and explanation for such similarities, has been the subject of fierce debate. Some follow BICKERTON’s (1984) Bioprogram Hypothesis which argues that creoles develop when a pidgin is acquired natively by subsequent generations. According to this theory, during the process of child language acquisition, speakers manage to restructure the limited and variable linguistic input that they receive into a fully-fledged language with its own grammar, due to an innate human faculty for language which operates on universal codes. However, this hypothesis has been disputed. For example, others prefer theories centred on language mixing and L2 acquisition to explain the similarities found in creoles across the world (e.g. MUFWENE, 2001). Some too reject the notion that creole languages even constitute an exceptional class of languages (cf. ABOH, 2016; DEGRAFF, 2003).

RC is often considered “semi-creole”, as termed by HOLM (1989, p. 392). Some features which have led to this classification are its occasional gendering of nouns, its overt copula and the existence of some compound tenses (CORNE, 1999, p. 70). The central explanation for its structural differences is the larger proportion of native French speakers present during creolisation, which meant L2 speakers had greater access to the lexifier language, French. Since one of the key conditions of creolisation is argued to be a restricted access to the target language, it is thought that RC did not go through the typical creolisation process and was not restructured to the same extent (HOLM, 1989, p. 393).

Creole languages offer an exciting opportunity to study phenomena of language change and language contact since they are new languages which form in just one generation, and often retain close contact with their lexifier (ROMAINE, 1988, p. 2). Analysis of a complex grammatical construction like relativisation can offer interesting insights into the lifecycle of these

languages (ROMAINE, 1988, p. 2). A relative clause is a type of subordinate clause which modifies a nominal in the main clause (NIKOLAEVA, 2006). This latter nominal is referred to as the head. The head need not be overtly present; relative clauses without an overt head are referred to as free relatives. This distinction is demonstrated in (1), where (1a) is headed by *the present*, and (1b) is free. In the interest of space, this paper only deals with headed relative clauses.

- (1) a. Jill liked the present [which I gave to her].
 b. Jill liked [what I gave to her]. (DE VRIES, 2002, p. 16)

Relativising strategies differ in the extent to which the role of the head in the relative clause is made explicit. The least explicit strategy is a gap strategy, which makes no indication of the role of the head in the relative clause. The head noun is interpreted as the filler of the gap (KROEGER, 2004, p. 165). On the other hand, a pronoun retention strategy is an explicit strategy, using a pronoun in the relative clause to indicate the role of the head noun. These pronouns are often referred to as “resumptive”. They agree with the head noun in number and gender, and usually reflect its case, thereby indicating its grammatical relation in the relative clause (KROEGER, 2004, p. 165). The third strategy to be discussed is a relative pronoun strategy. While a pronoun retention strategy places the pronoun *in-situ*, relative pronouns are positioned clause-initially, and the relative pronouns of a language are different to their personal pronouns (KROEGER, 2004, p. 177). Relative clauses using a gap strategy or a pronoun retention strategy may also be introduced with a relativiser. Relative clauses that are not introduced by a relativiser are referred to as zero-marked. It should be noted that relativising strategies vary considerably cross-linguistically, and that these strategies do not constitute an exhaustive list. The relativising strategies of French and the IOC will now be outlined.

French employs a relative pronoun strategy. Standard French does not allow zero-marking; the relative pronoun is obligatory. The relative pronoun varies according to several syntactic and semantic criteria. *Qui* ‘who’ is used when the pronoun functions as a subject (2a) or an animate prepositional complement in the relative clause; *que* ‘whom’ for objects (2b); *lequel* ‘which’ is used for complements of prepositions (2c) and agrees in number and gender with its head, resulting in surface forms *laquelle/lesquels/lesquelles*. *Où* ‘where’ is used to indicate time or place (2d) and *dont* ‘whose’ is used in genitives (2e). Examples are from SYEA (2017, pp. 384–385).

- (2) a. *L’étudiant qui est arrivé ce matin est intelligent.*
 ‘The student who arrived this morning is intelligent.’ [subject]
 b. *L’étudiant que j’ai rencontré ce matin vient de Prague.*
 ‘The student whom I met this morning comes from Prague.’ [direct object]
 c. *La table sur laquelle j’ai mis mes livres est cassée.*
 ‘The table on which I put my books is broken.’ [oblique]
 d. *L’endroit où habite ma mère est loin d’ici.*
 ‘The place where my mother lives is far from here.’ [locative]
 e. *L’enfant dont vous avez rencontré la mère est malade.*
 ‘The child whose mother you met is ill.’ [genitive]

In contrast, the IOC introduce relative clauses with an invariant relativiser, *ki*. The relativiser is optional, as indicated by the brackets in the below examples (from SYEA, 2017, pp. 387–388). Whether the role of the head is made explicit in the relative clause depends on the grammatical

role of the head noun in the relative clause. When functioning as subject or direct object, a gap strategy is employed. For obliques and genitives, a pronoun retention strategy is required.

- (3) a. *Madam (ki) ti sante la nu profeser*
 woman REL PAST sing DEF our teacher
 ‘The woman who sang is our teacher.’ [subject]
- b. *tifi (ki) to ti zwenn la apel Maryse*
 girl REL you PAST meet DEF call Maryse
 ‘The girl whom you met is called Maryse.’ [direct object]
- c. *Madam (ki) to ti pe koz ar li la malad*
 lady REL you PAST PROG speak with her DEF ill
 ‘The lady with whom you were talking is ill.’ [oblique]
- d. *Madam (ki) to ti zwenn so garson la malad*
 lady REL you PAST meet her son DEF ill
 ‘The lady whose son you met is ill.’ [genitive]

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to uncover the relativising strategies used in RC. In doing so, it will show that the relative system of RC is closer to that of the “full” IOC than that of French.

3. Methodology and data

The data for this study come from a mixed methods approach. The primary method was a corpus analysis. The corpus was compiled of seven texts in RC from a range of genres: two stories, a play script, a leaflet, a series of blog posts, and two magazines. Bibliographical details are found in the reference list. The texts were analysed and all relative clauses were extracted. Relative clauses were then coded for: the function of the head noun in the relative clause, the presence of a relativiser (and its form), and the presence of a resumptive pronoun. Since no genitive relatives were found in the corpus, the data for this part of the study came from a questionnaire completed online by native speakers. Participants were recruited on the criterion of being a native speaker of RC. The questionnaire was part of a wider study on relative clauses in the language. However, in the interest of space, only the results of the questions eliciting genitives will be discussed. Participants were asked to translate two genitive relative clauses from French into RC. A taxonomy of strategies used was then identified: a pronoun retention strategy, a gap strategy, zero-marking, relative marking and a relative pronoun strategy. The translations were then coded according to this taxonomy.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Subjects

52 subject relatives were found in the corpus. 81% exhibited a zero and gap strategy, as in (4), and the remaining 19% a relativiser and gap strategy, as in (5). Universal relativiser *ke* was used. It should be noted that, when followed by verbal marker of finiteness *i*, *ke* combines with

it resulting in surface form *ki*, but this does not reflect a case distinction as *qui* and *que* do in French (CORNE, 1995, p. 60). No resumptive pronouns were found.

- (4) *in gran mersi bann zanseygnan kréol, bann profeser kolej Ø la*
 a big thanks PL teacher creole PL teacher college REL PAST.PRF
partisipé!
 participate
 ‘A big thank you to all the creole teachers and college teachers who took part!’
- (5) *li té i zoué samn in ti fy ke lavé shevë noir é briyan.*
 3SG PAST.IPFV FIN play with a little girl REL have.PAST hair black and shiny
 ‘He was playing with a little girl who had black, shiny hair.’

4.2. Direct objects

23 direct object relatives were found. The strategies used patterned similarly to subject relatives; 83% employed a zero and gap strategy (6) and 17% a relativiser and gap strategy (7). The relativiser used was, again, universal *ke*. No resumptive pronouns were found.

- (6) *Mèrsi pou lo kadofrann Ø ou la döne amoin!*
 thank.you for the present REL 2SG PAST.PRF give to.me
 ‘Thank you for the present that you gave me!’
- (7) *Li la arèt la rivièr dé Marsouin pou pèsh in kilo bishik ke lu*
 3SG PAST.PRF stop the river PREP Marsouin to fish a kilo bishik REL 3SG
la depoz pou son momon.
 PAST.PRF drop.off for his mother
 ‘He stopped at the river Marsouin to fish a kilo of bishik, which he dropped off for his mother.’

The results thus far suggest that subject and direct object relative clauses in RC are more similar to the IOC than to French. In RC, just as in the IOC, subject and direct object relatives are introduced with an optional relativiser, and exhibit a gap strategy. This contrasts with French, which encodes the role of the head in the relative clause by means of an obligatory relative pronoun introducing the clause.

4.3. Obliques

27 oblique relatives were found in the corpus. The patterning of relativising strategies differed from subjects and direct objects, with obliques preferring a relativiser over zero-marking. 74% employed a relativiser and gap strategy and 26% a zero and gap strategy. The principal relativiser used was universal *ke*, as in (8)¹; however, an additional relativiser, *ousa*, was found for locative obliques, as in (9). This resembles the French locative oblique relativiser, *où*.

- (8) *In bransh le piédboi (k') le lou té i tourne otour; té i tonv*
 A branch the tree REL the wolf PAST.IPFV FIN turn PREP PAST.IPFV FIN fall
dirèk dessi le mur
 direct PREP the wall
 ‘A branch of the tree, around which the wolf was turning, stretched as far as the wall.’
- (9) *là o dann sièl ousa li té i parti ropozé, Bondië lamour la*
 DEM high in sky REL 3SG PAST.IPFV FIN leave rest God love PAST.PRF
vi...
 see
 ‘Up there in the sky where he went to rest, the God of love saw...’
- (10) *Toultan mon gran frèr té i shante in ti romanse dedan Ø i*
 All.the.time my big brother PAST.IPFV FIN sing a little song inside REL FIN
parl “kari”
 speak curry
 ‘All the time, my brother used to sing a little song in which it spoke about curry.’

The preference for a relativiser over zero-marking and the use of a different relativiser for locatives suggests that oblique relatives in RC are closer to French than subject and direct object relatives are. Further to this, two examples employing a relative pronoun strategy were found. *Lékél* in (11) resembles French relative pronoun *lequel* ‘which/whom’, also functioning as a prepositional complement. In (12), *kisa* is the complement of preposition *ansamn* ‘with’. *Kisa* is an interrogative pronoun in RC. ROMAINE (1988, p. 248) notes that interrogative pronouns are a linguistic category likely to grammaticalise into relative pronouns. Further research is hence needed to investigate whether *kisa* is grammaticalising into a relative pronoun.

- (11) *Projé- la la fénésans si lo minm prinsip Charline, ék in*
 project DEM PAST.PRF create PREP the same principle Charline with an
lasosiasion indépandan paran dési lékél té pe bazé
 association independent parent PREP REL PAST.IPFV can base
 ‘That project was created on the same principle as Charline, with an independent parent association on which it was based.’
- (12) *Fénésans Radio Zirondel Sinjozéf épi le group Maloya Maronér Koméla*
 found radio Zirondel Saint-Joseph then the group maloya Maroner Koméla
ansamn kisa li sort de lalbom
 with REL 3SG release two album
 ‘Founding Radio Zirondel Saint-Joseph then the maloya group Maronér Koméla, with whom he released two albums.’

4.4. Genitives

Participants of the online survey were asked to translate the following sentence from French into RC.

- (13) *J’ai rencontré une femme dont le mari est espion.*
 ‘I met a woman whose husband is a spy.’

The most popular strategy was a zero-marking and pronoun retention strategy (14a), used by 50% respondents. Next was a zero and gap strategy (14b), used by 15% respondents. A relativiser and pronoun retention strategy (14c) was used by 10% and a relativiser and gap strategy (14d) by 7%. The relativisers found were universal *ke* (French spelling *que* in (14c)) and variants of *sak*. *Sak* is the relativiser used in free relative clauses in RC. Use of this relativiser in genitives would benefit from further research. Finally, there was also some evidence of a relative pronoun strategy. Two respondents used relativiser *don* (14e), resembling French relative pronoun *dont*. While this suggests a relative pronoun strategy could be in use with genitives too, respondents may have been influenced by the French translation, so this should be verified with alternative methods.

- (14) a. *Ma rencontre in madan ∅ son mari lé espion*
 have.1SG meet a woman REL her husband is spy
- b. *Ma rencontre un madam ∅ le mari lé espion*
 have.1SG meet a woman REL the husband is spy
- c. *Ma rencontre in fam que son boug lé in espion*
 have.1SG meet a woman REL her husband is a spy
- d. *Ma rencontre un fenm sak le mari lé espion*
 have.1SG meet a woman REL the husband is spy
- e. *Mi la rencont une fem don le mari lé espion*
 1SG have.PAST.PRF meet a woman REL the husband is spy

Genitive relatives in RC exhibit similarity with the IOC, using an optional relativiser and preferring a pronoun retention strategy, which is not found in French. While a resumptive pronoun is obligatory in genitives in the IOC, it seems to be preferred but not required in RC.

5. Conclusion

This paper has outlined the relativising strategies found for headed relatives in RC. It has found that subject and direct object relative clauses employ a gap strategy, and are introduced by an optional relativiser, *ke*. They are therefore very similar to those in the IOC, which use the same strategy, with relativiser *ki*. Oblique relatives in RC are also introduced with an optional relativiser. However, the results suggest that the presence of a relativiser is preferred. An additional relativiser, *ousa*, was found for locative obliques. Both its form and function appear to be similar to French *où*. While the IOC require resumptive pronouns in oblique relatives, RC seems to maintain a gap strategy. In genitive relatives though, RC seems to prefer the pronoun retention strategy, and hence exhibit more similarity to the IOC. Genitive relatives also employ an optional relativiser *ke*, but an alternative *sak* was found. Finally, some evidence of a relative pronoun strategy was found in oblique and genitive relative clauses. It is unknown whether this is an internal development or a result of French influence. On balance, the evidence from this pilot study suggests that the relative system of RC is closer to that of the IOC than it is to French. Therefore, regarding this aspect of its grammar, the results do not lend credence to a classification of RC as “semi-creole”. However, further research is required to determine whether a relative pronoun strategy is developing in some contexts for oblique and genitive relative clauses. If wider study does find it to be in use, this would support the classification of RC as a “semi-creole”.

Notes

1. Note that *ke* is realised as *k'*. This reflects variation and inconsistency in the spelling system as there is no official orthography.

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Corpus materials

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