

Properties of noun phrases in creole languages: a synthetic comparative exposition

This paper highlights the properties of noun phrases including both determined and determinerless nouns in 15 creoles representative of distinct lexifiers and substratal sources. The empirical data being examined are taken from the contributions to a co-edited volume by Baptista and Guéron (to appear).

A comparison of noun phrases in creole languages from various lexical bases has already been the focus of several studies over the years: Taylor (1971, 1977), Boretzky (1983) and Holm (1990). While the common point of these studies was the nominal constituent in creole languages, they emphasized distinct aspects of the nominal domain. For instance, although Holm offered a detailed account of the use of determiners and number in the Atlantic creoles he studied, he focused particularly on their use of the possessive pronoun as an emphatic form of the possessive adjective. In this paper, the emphasis will be placed instead on the interpretive variation of overt determiners, bare nouns and plural marking.

The paper provides a set of tables and detailed accounts of the determiner systems of these languages that are meant to reflect their full diversity. What emerges from the authors' contributions is that the paradigms of overt determiners and plural marking vary from one creole to the next. For instance, while some creoles such as Cape Verdean Creole display a full paradigm of overt determiners and express plurality overtly via an overt plural bound morpheme, creoles such as Sranan only display a paradigmatic subset of determiners and does not make use of an overt plural marker. In some creoles such as Guinea-Bissau Creole, the use of an overt plural marker is correlated with specificity and animacy. In AAE or Mindanao Chabacano, no such correlation may be found. In creoles like Berbice Dutch, the entire paradigm of overt determiners may be interpreted as specific or non-specific, whereas in others such as Haitian, the definite marker can only be interpreted as specific. In the domain of bare nouns, bare nouns may receive a wide variety of interpretations in some creoles such as Papiamentu where they may be interpreted as specific singular or plural as well as non-specific singular or plural. In other creoles such as Haitian, their reading is more restricted and may be limited to non-specific singular or plural. In all creoles except for AAE, bare nouns may appear in both subject and object argumental positions but in some creoles, the interpretation of bare nouns will vary depending on their syntactic distribution. For instance, in Santome, bare nouns in subject position tend to receive a definite singular reading whereas bare nouns in object position tend to be interpreted as indefinite plurals. In other creoles such as Seychellois, no such interpretive subject/object asymmetry may obtain.

While highlighting the complexity and diversity of the determiner systems in these creoles, this comparative paper examines their common widespread use of bare nouns and the role of UG in shaping these nominal properties. This in turn leads us to explore some of the implications for the overall nature of creole languages.

Word count: 502