

The grammaticalization of the Predicate Marker *li* in Mauritian Creole

Abstract

Mauritian Creole (MC) is a French based creole, with SVO word order, but unlike French, it lacks inflectional morphology and there is no copula. Tense, Mood and Aspect (TMA) are expressed by pre-verbal markers. From the first instantiations of the creole, the morpheme *li*, which is homophonous with the 3sg pronoun (he, she, it, him, her), occurs between the subject and the predicate in non-tensed copulative like clauses, as in (1):

- (1) *bibass' li goût* (Chrestien, 1820)
loquat *li* tasty
The loquat is tasty

At one stage, the morphemes *li* and *la* seem interchangeable, when the subject has a discourse antecedent, i.e. it is referential, and, for a brief period, they even co-occur. However, once *la* grammaticalizes into a Specificity¹ marker, the two morphemes cease to co-occur. A [+specific] subject is marked by *la* as in (2a) and *li* only surfaces when the subject is [-specific] as in (2b):

- (2) a. *zako la kontan banann* b. *enn zako li kontan banann*
monkey SP like banana a monkey *li* like banana
The monkey likes bananas A monkey likes bananas

In modern MC, *li* is not required when the predicate is an NP, an AdjP or a PP as in (3a), but it is required when the predicate is a DP, as in (3b):

- (3) a. *Pol dokter/malad/dan loto* b. *Pol li enn dokter*
Paul doctor/sick/ in car Paul *li* a doctor
Paul is a doctor/sick/in the car Paul is a doctor

A similar morpheme *i* (derived from *li*) in Seychelles Creole² (SC) has been analyzed as a resumptive pronoun (Bollée, 1977). I argue against this claim on the grounds that it does not agree in number with the subject. The fact that *i/li* is in complementary distribution with TMA markers, has prompted its analysis as a ‘non-future tense’ marker (Papen, 1975). I refute this claim on the grounds that, while all verbs and TMA markers follow Negation, *i/li* precedes Negation. *Li* may well have originated as a resumptive, with the discourse pragmatic function of marking the subject as referential, but it has now grammaticalized into a Predicate Marker with the clearly defined functions of licensing predication of [-specific] subjects, and DP predicates.

Drawing on socio-historical conditions that prevailed at the time of the developments of MC and SC, I argue that substrate (Bantu) influence favoured the use of a Predicate Marker in SC to mark the subject as referential, while in Mauritius, the influence of the superstrate (French) motivated the reanalysis of the locative adverb *là* to mark referentiality. I also argue that the paths to grammaticalization of *li* and *la* are linked – they both have in common the feature [+specific].

¹ I assume Enç’s (1991) definition of Specificity: ‘an NP is specific if its referent represents a subset of a referent already present in the domain of discourse; and it is [-specific] otherwise’. In this sense, specificity and referentiality overlap because they are both referentially anchored in the discourse.

² Seychelles Creole is derived from MC.

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