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Relativiser drop in Subject Relatives: the case of Mauritian.

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ABSTRACT.

This paper examines the omission of the relativizer *ki* in Subject Relative Clauses in Mauritian Creole. Recent studies, focusing on Non Subject Relative Clauses, have proposed that relativiser omission could be explained by factors such as ambiguity avoidance, predictability (*via* logistic regression models) and lexical choice. Our contribution is to test the validity of two of these hypotheses namely ambiguity avoidance and determiner selection, in Subject Relativisation.

1 Introduction

In Mauritian Creole (henceforth MC)- a French-based Creole - relative drop is possible not just Non-Subject Relative Clauses, but in Subject Relative Clauses (SRC) as well, contrary to Baker's (1972) assumption. Indeed, in his grammar of Mauritian Creole, he mentions that when the subject is relativised, the clause has to be introduced by *ki* : he offers example (1a) to illustrate his point. It turns out that this sentence can be constructed without *ki* (1b).

- (1) a. Mo ti zwenn sa bann dimoun ki res dan kwen lari la.
1SG PST meet DEM PL people KI live in corner street DET
I met these people who live in corner of the street.
b. Mo ti zwenn sa bann dimoun res dan kwen lari la.

Our claim is that Baker's generalisation is too strong : omission of a K-element is possible even in SRCs.

2 Background

It is currently agreed in the literature that English Relative Clauses allow relativiser omission if the RC's gap is in object position. However, in colloquial English or in AAVE, this phenomenon is also available in Subject Relativisation as seen from

(2-3)¹.

- (2) The man did it was a friend of mine. (Bolinger 1972)
 (3) A woman's got a man that likes to cook is a lucky girl². (Toole 1980)

Bolinger (1972) proposes that (2) is acceptable because the relative clause is a very short one. He also mentions semantic factors : the relativiser is required to “enhance restrictiveness” (p. 68)³. On the basis of his proposal, we claim here that the referential status of the whole noun phrase ‘modified’ by the relative is a determining factor in the licensing of K-element drop. Furthermore, Wasow et al. (2005) argue that factors such as lexical choice make relativisers obligatory or strongly preferred in English NSRCs. They also argue that the reverse is true: there are also factors, including lexical choice, that make omission of the relativiser obligatory or strongly preferred. Based on Wasow et al., we investigate the correlation between lexical choice and relativiser omission focusing on determiner variation.⁴ Our analysis is the result of a two-stroke investigation. We first submitted a questionnaire to 15 Mauritian speakers who had the task of forming a sentence containing a relative clause out of two given sentences. Most of the stimuli involved relativising the subject, as illustrated in the following example:

- (4) CONTEXT: Mari ena enn sat.(Mary has a cat)
 Sat la pe mont lor latab. Mari krij ar sat la.
 Cat DEF PROG climb on table. Mary scold with cat DEF

The cat is climbing on the table. Mary scolds it.

Four variants, containing different combinations of the presence or absence of the K-element and of determiner *la* (for specific referents), were presented for selection.

¹See Bolinger (1972), Wasow (2005), and Temperley (2003), among others, who observe that this phenomenon is severely constrained.

²This is an extract of a dialogue from a novel suggesting that *that* omission is perceived and represented as non-standard speech.

³Sentence (i) can be uttered in two contexts: according to the author, in Context 1, the relative clause is redundant, whereas in Context 2, the relative is “truly restrictive”.

- i. The only man that we can assign to advertising is Smith.
 ii. Context 1 : If we have any thought for the good of the company, the only man we can assign to advertising is Smith.
 Context 2 : There are several interested, but the only man that we can assign to advertising is Smith ; the others can't be spared from their present posts

⁴We leave for future research the investigation of other lexical variation such as nouns, adjectives, etc. We have also excluded locative RCs which can be relativised with *kot* where omission is also possible. Moreover, the *ki* is also used in embedded clauses can also be dropped. These cases are yet to be investigated.

- (5) a. Mari pe krij ek sat ki pe mont lor latab.
 b. Mari pe krij ek sat \emptyset pe mont lor latab.
 c. Mari pe krij ek sat ki pe mont lor latab la.
 d. Mari pe krij ek sat \emptyset pe mont lor latab la.
 Mary PROG shout at cat KI PROG climb on table DET
 Mary is shouting at (the) cat that is climbing onto the table.

In spite of the variation of determiners and contexts in the pairs of sentences, there were few instances of *ki*-deletion in general, but there were hints pointing to a correlation between *ki* drop and determiner choice. We next turned to introspective data in order to test the importance of four variables in subject relativization: (i) structural ambiguity (ii) determiner variation (iii) [\pm human] nature of the referent (iv) the argument position of the pivot inside the main clause (subject vs. object). There was no indication that factors (iii) and (iv) played any part in the issue being investigated here. We therefore focused on structural ambiguity and determiner variation.

3 Structural Ambiguity

Several researches have focused on structural ambiguity as a factor influencing relativizer drop in English NSRC (Bolinger 1972), (Temperley 2003). In this section we look at ambiguity avoidance in SRC. In (6), the PP *lor bistop* might be interpreted as the predicate of a relative clause modifying NP *zelev* or as a locative.

- (6) Enn bis pou pas pran zelev lor bistop
 A bus irr pass take student on bus-stop
 A bus will pick up the students at the bus-stop.

Structural ambiguity is further supported by cases where the relativized NP is non-definite/specific, that is when the NP is determined by the following prenominal determiners: *enn*, numerals *de*, *trwa*..., the plural marker *bann* and so forth. No such ambiguity occurs when the specific marker *la* is postpose to the relativised NP (see next section) unlike other types of determination.

- (7) Mo'nn met latab inn kase la deor.
 1SG put table PERF break DEF outside
 I've put the table which has broken is outside.
- (8) *Mo'nn met enn latab inn kase deor.
 1SG put IND table PERF break outside
 I've put a table which has broken is outside.

The string *enn latab inn kase* might be parsed as an independent clause whereas in *latab inn kase la*, clause-final *la* signals the presence of a RC. DET + N + VP is therefore potentially ambiguous⁵. We next turn to lexical variation, more specifically determiner variation which as will be demonstrated, influences relativiser omission.

4 Determiner variation

As mentioned above, results from our questionnaires indicated that relativiser omission is less likely to occur in a non-definite context. In this section, we consider the influence of determiner choice: numerals, the so-called indefinite article *enn*-‘a’/one’, quantifiers, demonstrative and specific and plural marking.

Determiner *la* is described as ‘specific’ because it implies that the referent has already been mentioned :

- (9) Pye la
tree DET
The tree. (that you know)

The demonstrative determiner is made up of pronominal demonstrative element *sa* that obligatorily selects *la*.

- (10) Sa pye la
This tree DET
This tree.

Crucially, *la* occurs at the right edge of the relativised NP:

- (11) Lev [(sa) zanfán ki pe dormi la]
wake DEM child C PROG sleep DET
Lit. Wake up the/this child who is sleeping.

We then consider numerals and the indefinite *enn*. In these configurations, if the RC is restrictive, *ki* is mandatory.

- (12) a. Trwa/enn garson ki inn al fer letid lafrans inn retourne san
three/a boy KI PERF go do study France PERF return without
diplom. (Restrictive reading)
diploma

⁵However, in context, intonation prevents ambiguity

Three/a boy(s) who had gone to study in France came back without a degree.

- b. Trwa/enn garson inn al fer letid lafrans inn retourne san
 three/a boy PERF go do study France PERF return without
 diplom. (event reading)
 diploma

(i) Three/a boy(s) gone for studies in France came back without a degree.

(ii) * if restrictive reading

In (12a), the RC restricts the set of boys whereas in (12b), the VP *inn al fer...* plays no role in identifying a subset of boys, thus allowing *ki* drop. Relativisation of bare nouns is similarly constrained: the RC is crucial in identifying the referent and therefore RCs without *ki* are ungrammatical.

- (13) Mari pe koz ar etidyan ki inn gagn labours.
 Mary PROG talk with a student KI PERF have scholarship
 Mary is talking to a student who got a scholarship.

- (14) *Mari pe koz ar etidyan inn gagn labours.

Whenever a relativised noun phrase contains a quantifier, *tou*, *sak* or *sel*, as in (15) below, *ki* cannot be omitted. We suppose that contrary to specific/demonstrative determiners, quantifiers by themselves are not sufficient to establish the identity of the referent: the relative clause is needed for referential purposes. We therefore postulate that the correlation between the quantifier and the relative clause for the purpose of determining reference forbids the dropping of *ki*.

- (15) Tou zanfán ki pa'nn al lekol inn gagn pinision.
 Every child KI *neg'perf* school *perf* get punishment
 Every child who didn't go to school got punished.

- (16) *Tou zanfán pa'nn al lekol inn gagn pinision.

Although this section focuses on the status of determiners in the use of *ki*, we would like to include those adjectives that restrict the reference of the noun phrase exemplified by *premye-* 'first'.

- (17) Rama premye politisyen ki'nn liberaliz lekonomi.
 Rama first politician KI'perf liberalise economy.
 Rama is the first politician who has liberalised the economy.

- (18) *Rama premye politisyen inn liberaliz lekonomi.

As in the case of quantifiers, *ki* cannot be dropped here for the following reason : the 'adjective' is correlated with the presence of the relative clause and together they establish the identity of the referent. The interaction between a restrictive relative and plural marking on the noun give certain semantic effects on the noun.

- (19) a. Mo'nn invit bann koleg ki kontan manz briyani.
 1SG'PERF invite PL colleague KI like eat briyani
 I invited colleagues who like to eat briyani.
 b. Mo'nn invit bann koleg kontan manz briyani.

It seems that following distinction: with *ki*, one supposes that other colleagues have been left out of the invitation, whereas without *ki*, nothing is said about whether other colleagues have been included in the invitation. Therefore *bann + ki* combination picks out a subset of individuals out of a contextually determined set.

Possessive RCs occurs in restricted relatives under certain conditions: for instance, the following RC containing a possessive RC is only felicitous in a context where a given individual has more than one sister. The RC is necessary to pick out a certain sister among others. This explains why *ki* is needed.

- (20) So ser ki travay lotel Shandrani inn perdi so travay.
 3SG.POSS sister KI work hotel Shandrani PERF lose 3SG.POSS work
 His sister who works at Hotel Shandrani has lost her job.

Let us now consider specific and demonstrative determiners.

- (21) Liv ki koz lor lager la interesan.
 book KI talk on war DET interesting
 The book that talks about war is interesting.
 (22) Sa liv ki koz lor lager la interesan.
 DEM book KI talk on war DET interesting
 The book that talks about war is interesting.

The two relatives in (21) and (22) are closely related in meaning : 'among all the things that have the property of being a book, the one on the subject of war is interesting.' They also have variants where the relativiser *ki* is omitted.

- (23) Liv ki koz lor lager la interesan.
 (24) Sa liv ki koz lor lager la interesan.

As mentioned earlier, *la* and the demonstrative are used to indicate that an individual has been mentioned and that the NP refers to that individual. On the other hand, a restrictive relative brings about a restriction on the class of individuals which satisfies the property described by the subordinate (*koz lor lager*) (Corblin 1987) (Kleiber 1987). *ki* omission is allowed if the relative clause is not crucial in identifying a referent: it is most felicitous when the referent has just been mentioned, as indicated by *la* or by the demonstrative. Therefore, we argue that salient topics are more likely to allow *ki* drop. The above sentences, for example, are acceptable if the book in question has been the subject of recent discussion.

5 Summary and Conclusion

In this study, we looked at cases of *ki* omission in subject relatives. We first argued that the presence of *ki* is a strategy against a structural ambiguity that could arise in certain contexts. We looked at strings of words which could be parsed differently, either as a main clause or as a noun phrase containing a relative clause. Our second hypothesis is based on an examination of determiner use : *ki* signals the 'restrictiveness' of the relative. In this view, whenever *ki* is dropped, the RC is not central in picking out a referent out of a class of individuals. The factors that we have identified in this apply to subject relativisation : an interesting question is whether they apply to object relativisation as well but we leave this for future research. .

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