

Relativiser Drop in Subject Relativisation: 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 have proposed that relativiser omission in Non Subject Relativisation could be explained by factors such as ambiguity avoidance, predictability (*via* logistic regression models) and lexical choice. Our contribution is to test the relevance of two factors that have been mentioned in the literature, namely ambiguity avoidance and determiner selection, in Subject Relativisation.

1 Introduction

In Mauritian Creole (henceforth MC), a French-based creole, relativiser-drop or *ki*-drop is possible not just in Non-Subject Relativisation (NSR), but in Subject Relativisation (SR) as well, contrary to Baker's (1972) assumption¹. 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 his example is grammatical even 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 at the corner of the street.
- b. Mo ti zwenn sa bann dimoun ∅ res dan kwen lari la.
1SG PST meet DEM PL people ∅ live in corner street DET
I met these people who live at the corner of the street.

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

¹Subject relativisation is when the noun phrase that is relativised (the pivot) occupies the subject position inside the relative clause. Conversely, non subject relativisation involves relativising a pivot that occupies some position other than subject in the relative clauses, for instance, that of object.

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, *that*-drop may also be omitted in Subject Relativisation as seen from (2-3)².

- (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 girl³. (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* (1972:68)⁴. At this point, let us make a distinction between the pivot (mentioned above) and the complex NP, i.e, the NP containing the relative clause. We argue that the referential status of this complex NP is a determining factor in licensing *ki*-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.⁵ 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) Mari ena enn sat. Sat la pe mont lor latab. Mari krij ar sat la.
Mary has one cat. Cat DEF PROG climb on table. Mary scold with cat DET
The cat is climbing on the table. Mary scolds the cat.

²See Bolinger (1972), Wasow (2005), and Temperley (2003), among others, who observe that this phenomenon is severely constrained.

³This is an extract of a dialogue from a novel suggesting that *that* omission is perceived and represented as non-standard speech.

⁴Bolinger illustrates restrictiveness with the following sentence: "The only man that we can assign to advertising is Smith". This sentence 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*.

- (1) Context 1 : If we have any thought for the good of the company, the only man we can assign to advertising is Smith.
- (2) 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.

⁵We leave for future research the investigation of other instances of lexical variation such as nouns, adjectives, etc. We have also excluded locative RCs which can be relativised with *kot* and where omission is also possible. Moreover, the subordinator *ki* also used in embedded clauses can also be dropped. These cases have yet to be investigated.

In spite of the variation of determiners and contexts in the pairs of sentences that were provided to the informants, 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 complex NP 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 NSRs (Bolinger 1972), (Temperley 2003). In this section we look at ambiguity avoidance in SRCs. In (5a), the PP *lor bistop* might be interpreted as the predicate of a relative clause modifying NP *zelev* or as an adjunct.

- (5) a. 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.
- b. Enn bis pou pas pran [_{complexNP} zelev lor bistop] or
Enn bis pou pas pran [_{simpleNP} zelev] [lor bistop]

Structural ambiguity is further supported by the so-called *garden-path effect* (Temperley 2003)⁶, in cases where the relativised NP is non-definite/specific, that is when the NP is determined by the following pronominal determiners: *enn*, numerals *de*, *trwa*..., the plural marker *bann* and so forth. No such ambiguity occurs when the specific marker *la* is postposed to the relativised NP (see next section) unlike other types of determination.

⁶Temperley (2003) notices that that cases of *that*-omission with some transitive verbs allowing embedded clauses could result in a *garden-path effect*, in which the intended subject of the embedded clause can be understood as a direct object and hence the use of *that* is tailored to avoid such ambiguities.

1. [She knew the story] was true.
2. She knew that the story was true.

- (6) a. Mo'nn met latab inn kase la deor.
1SG'PERF put table PERF break DET outside
Lit. I've put the table has broken outside.
- b. *Mo'nn met enn latab inn kase deor.
1SG'PERF put IND table PERF break outside
Lit. I've put a table has broken 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 ambiguous⁷.

- (7) Mo'nn met sa latab (ki)'nn kase la deor la.
1SG'PERF put DEM table KI'PERF DET break outside ADV
Lit. I've put a table has broken outside.

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. Wasow et al. (2005) look at *that*-drop in English NSRCs. They found that the relativiser was more likely to be dropped with definite *the* (65.8%), and quantifiers such as *every* (85.3%) and *all* (75.7%). Conversely, bare NPs (36.9%) or those determined by *a/an* (25.2%), numerals (46.9%) and an NPI like *any* (50.9%) would less frequently allow *that*-drop. We follow Wasow et al.'s (2005) intuitions and consider, in this section, the influence of determiner choice: numerals, the so-called indefinite article *enn*- 'a/one', quantifiers, demonstrative and specific determiners and plural marking.

Let us first give a few descriptive facts about MC. Determiner *la* is described as 'specific' because it implies either that the referent has already been mentioned or that it is contextually present:

- (8) Pye la finn kase.
tree DET PERF break
The tree is broken. (that you know)

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

⁷However, in context, intonation prevents ambiguity.

- (9) Sa pye la finn kase.
This tree DET PERF break
This tree has broken.

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

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

The following English sentences illustrate the use of numerals: when used without a definite determiner, they only form non-restrictive relative clauses (see the contrast between 11 and 12). MC is similar to English in that relativisers are compulsory in non-restrictives.

- (11) Three girls, who are beautiful, are flirting with John. ≠
(12) The three girls who are beautiful are flirting with John.

A NP with *enn* may have a restrictive extension in generic sentences, but not in sentences describing events that actually take place, as noted by Kleiber (1987), because in the latter the restrictive/appositive distinction does not hold.

- (13) a. Enn zoli tifi atir bokou garson.
A pretty girl attract many boy
A pretty girl attracts many guys.
b. Enn tifi *(ki) zoli atir bokou garson.
A girl KI pretty attract many boy
Lit. A girl who is pretty attracts many guys.

In parallel with the above examples, we can combine bare nouns with property-denoting predicates to get a restrictive reading:

- (14) a. Pol kontan fam lizye ble.
Paul like woman eye blue
Paul likes women with blue eyes.
b. Pol kontan fam (ki) ena lizye ble.
Paul like woman KI has eye blue
Lit. Paul likes women that have blue eyes.
c. Pol kontan fam *(ki) zot lizye ble.
Paul like woman KI 3SG.POSS eye blue
Paul likes women whose eyes are blue.

Semantically, all three sentences imply that if *x* is a woman and *x* has blue eyes, then Paul likes her. Whenever a relativised noun phrase contains a quantifier, *tou*, *sak* or *sel*, as in (15a) below, *ki* cannot be omitted.

- (15) a. Tou zanafan *(ki) pa'nn al lekol inn gagn pinision.
 Every child KI NEG'PERF go school PERF get punishment
 Every child who didn't go to school got punished.
- b. ≠ Tou zanafan inn gagn pinision.
 Every child PERF get punishment
 Every child got punished.

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'.

- (16) a. Rama premye politisyen *(ki)'nn liberaliz lekonomi.
 Rama first politician KI'PERF liberalise economy.
 Rama is the first politician who has liberalised the economy.
- b. ≠ Rama inn liberaliz lekonomi.
 Rama PERF liberalise economy
 Rama has liberalised the economy.

The interaction between a restrictive relative and plural marking on the noun has to be marked by an overt *ki*.

- (17) a. Bann etidyan ena kas fer defile lor kanpis.
 PL student has money make fashion-show on campus
 Rich students show off on campus. (regularly)
- b. ≠ Bann etidyan ki ena kas fer defile lor kanpis.
 PL student KI has money make fashion-show on campus
 Students who are rich show off on campus.

It seems that following distinction is available: with *ki*, one supposes that students who are rich show off, whereas without *ki*, nothing is said about whether other students keep from showing off. Therefore, in this context, *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.

- (18) 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.

As shown above, the complex NPs occur in generic contexts as is the case with NP with *bann*, indefinite *enn*, quantifiers or those that contain bare nouns. In all these contexts, the relative clause denotes a property that participates in the semantic composition of the complex NP. Likewise complex NPs with a restrictive adjective or a possessive all had obligatory *ki*. Compare with the following examples without restrictive reading where *ki* is optional:

- (19) Trwa/enn etidyan (ki)'nn fer letid lafrans, inn retourne san
three/one student KI'PERF do study France, PERF return without
diplom.
diploma
Three/one student(s) who went for studies in France, came back without a
degree.
- (20) Etidyan (ki) ena kas fer defile lor kanpis.
student KI has money make fashion-show on campus
Students who are rich show off on campus.

Let us now consider specific and demonstrative determiners. 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 Lebanese war is interesting. They also have variants where the relativiser *ki* is omitted.

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

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 to mean those which satisfy the property described by the subordinate (*koz lor lager Liban*) (Corblin 1987). With *ki*, both the main clause and the restriction are asserted: there exists a book about the Lebanese war and that it is interesting. When *ki* is omitted, the sentence presupposes that there is a book about Lebanese war and asserts that it is interesting (Heim and Kratzer 1998). The sentences with *ki* might be followed by the following question from the addressee: *lekel liv?* 'which book?' but the *ki*-less alternatives cannot. Those might instead be followed by: *PENA enn liv koz lor lager* 'but there is NO such book'.

5 Summary

In this study, we looked at cases of *ki* omission in subject relatives. It was observed that Baker's generalisation was too strong. We argued that the presence of *ki* is a strategy against 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. Secondly, we noted that the presence of *ki* was correlated to a restrictive meaning with indefinites as well as with possessive or when a restrictive adjective was used. With definites and demonstrative determiners, however, we noted that *ki* is optional and that when it is dropped, the relative clause is interpreted as presupposed information. 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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