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Null arguments and homonymy flight in the development of Creole pronoun systems

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1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the prevailing opinion of many creolists and with some traditional generative approaches to *pro*-drop phenomena, Roberts (1999) claims that Creoles have no referential null subjects. He continues: ‘We can attribute this to the fact that creole agreement systems are too impoverished to permit recovery of the content of referential *pro*.’ However, in the last two decades, many data that obviously contradict this claim have been brought to light. In fact, null subjects have become an integral part of many Creole pronoun systems.

In some Atlantic Creole languages, as for example in Palenquero, Saramaccan (Veenstra 1996) and Haitian Creole (DeGraff 1993), pronominal null arguments have emerged due to the fact that overt weak pronouns lost their referential properties completely or at least partly and turned into functional agreement markers by reanalysis. Likewise in Cape Verdean Creole, a Portuguese-based Creole, which will be discussed in section 3 of this article, null subjects are evidently a by-product of the rise of agreement morphemes. In other Creole languages the emergence of null arguments does not result from any change of the verbal functional morphology. Thus, contrary to the view implicitly formulated by Roberts (1999) and still upheld by some theoretical linguists, *pro*-drop phenomena are not necessarily dependent on any particular morphological make-up or development of verbal markers. Just like in other highly analytic languages, the decisive factor in the insertion and interpretation of null arguments in the languages concerned is rather the topic-worthiness of referents. This can be observed in some French-based Creoles of the Indian Ocean, for instance in present-day Seychelles Creole, Reunion Creole and Mauritian Creole (Michaelis 1994; Sycé 1993), whose pronoun system will be analysed in the following section. Interestingly, as will be finally elucidated in 3.3, even languages like Cape Verdean Creole, which have implemented agreement markers, sometimes allow subject pronouns referring to topics to have a null realization.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF NULL ARGUMENTS IN MAURITIAN CREOLE

2.1. *The introduction of discourse oriented null pronouns*

On the basis of Mauritian Creole data that are included in fictional texts written in the 19th century and in the 18th century shortly after creolization took place, Adone (1994) illustrates that Mauritian Creole did not display any referential null subjects in finite clauses till the end of the 19th century. Accordingly, the early Mauritian Creole pronoun system did not contain any null arguments. Pronominal

subject as well as pronominal object arguments were represented by overt subject or overt object pronouns, respectively. As shown by Baker (1972), any morphological weak-strong distinctions did not exist (cf. Table 1)

Table 1
Homonymy between strong and weak pronouns in early Mauritian Creole;
(after Baker 1972)

	Subject pronouns		Object pronouns	
	weak	strong	weak	strong
1.SG.	<i>mô</i>	<i>môm</i>	<i>mua</i>	<i>mua</i>
2.SG.	<i>to</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>tua</i>	<i>tua</i>
3.SG.	<i>li</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>li</i>
1.PL.	<i>nu</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>nu</i>
2.PL.	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>
3.PL.	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>

Although Mauritian Creole has not yet established any functional agreement markers and even lost some morphological TMA specifications (Adone p.c.), it nowadays permits null arguments to be inserted in finite clauses. In colloquial present-day Mauritian Creole the weak first and second person, singular and plural subject pronouns are represented by null pronouns in clauses whose main verb is marked by overt TMA markers indicating specific time reference (Syea 1993) (1a-b).¹ Their *phi*-feature content (person, number) is recovered in the actual discourse situation by their association with the respective speech act participants (SAPs). Thus, the first and second person null subjects of Mauritian Creole are simply identified by their reference to those entities that, according to Kuno's (1976) empathy principle, are provided with the highest inherent topic-worthiness. Also, weak third person singular and plural subject pronouns that refer to animate and human entities are able to remain phonologically null (Syea 1993). In finite clauses containing functional tense, mood or aspect morphemes they are interpreted as definite pronouns if they are identifiable in relation to a prominent discourse topic explicitly introduced into the preceding discourse (1c).

¹ Note that pronominal null subjects are indicated by 'pro' in the examples and tables. The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; CL = clitic; COND = conditional; COP = copula; DET = determinative; FUT = future tense; IMPERF = imperfective; NEG = negation marker; PAST = past tense; PERF = perfective; PL = plural; PROG = progressive; PRON = pronoun; SG = singular

Modern Mauritian Creole

- (1) (a) **pro** *pa ti dir tua fer sa*
 NEG PAST say you do this
 ‘Didn’t I tell you to do this?’
- (b) **pro** *pu repar sime la dimeñ*
 FUT repair street tomorrow
 ‘We will repair the street tomorrow.’
- (c) *Ki Pyer pe fer? – pro pe petir labutik*
 what Peter PROG do PROG paint shop
 ‘What is Peter doing? – He is painting the shop.’

Hence, Mauritian Creole has become a fully-fledged *pro*-drop language during the 20th century. All of its weak subject pronouns nowadays obtain, at least under certain conditions, a null representation in finite clauses. But why did this development take place? How could the null realization of weak subject pronouns prevail in Mauritian Creole although it has never been accompanied by the rise or any modification of functional agreement markers? In view of the fact that, thanks to their phonological realization, the overt weak subject pronouns of early Mauritian Creole exhibit a much more specified feature representation than the present-day null pronouns and consequently seem to be less susceptible to parsing failures than the latter, this change is even more puzzling.

Table 2

Subject pronouns and object pronouns in modern colloquial Mauritian Creole²

	Subject pronouns		Object pronouns	
	weak	strong	weak	strong
1.SG.	pro	<i>mô</i>	<i>mua</i>	<i>mua</i>
2.SG.	pro	<i>to</i>	<i>tua</i>	<i>tua</i>
3.SG.	pro / <i>li</i> (neut.)	<i>li</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>li</i>
1.PL.	pro	<i>nu</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>nu</i>
2.PL.	pro	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>
3.PL.	pro / <i>zot</i> (neut.)	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>	<i>zot</i>

Paradoxically, in accordance with the *Subset Principle* (Halle 1997), which requires the insertion of the most specific exponent into a given morpheme, the null forms are nevertheless preferred to their overt weak counterparts in colloquial

² Identification of **pro** (1,2SG,PL) in the actual discourse situation is by its reference to a SAP; identification of **pro** (3SG,PL) is by its association with the prominent discourse topic.

speech. That is because, in contrast to the former overt pronouns, the new zero expressions decisively differ from the strong subject pronouns with regard to their morphological representation. Their introduction, therefore, has to be seen as an instance of homonymy flight. It enriches the Mauritian Creole pronoun system by drawing a morphological distinction between strong and weak forms (cf. Table 2). Moreover, it helps to reduce articulatory and perceptual efforts in actual discourse situations due to the fact that subjects that refer to highly thematic and therefore recoverable entities can be omitted from TMA marked clauses.

2.2. *The introduction of indefinite null pronouns*

Syea (1993) points out that modern colloquial Mauritian Creole also features indefinite null pronouns. Where there is no topic DP in the preceding context they can be associated with, the 3rd person referential null subjects of TMA marked clauses represent specific indefinite pronouns with an existential quantificational interpretation (2a). In finite root clauses the main verb of which lacks any overt tense or aspect specifications but is modified by an instrumental or locational adjunct promoting a generic reading 3rd person null subjects are interpreted as indefinite pronouns with universal quantification (2b).

Modern Mauritian Creole

(2) (a) **pro** *fin koke Anand so loto*
 PERF steal Anand his car
 ‘Someone has stolen Anand’s car’

(b) *pro van puasõ dã bazar*
 sell Fish in market
 ‘One sells fish in the market. / Fish is sold in the market.’

Obviously, these null pronouns are even more incompatible with the canonical characterization of the null element *pro* than the above mentioned discourse oriented null subjects. With the exception of Huang (1984), Holmberg (2005) and some others, most work on null subject phenomena denies the occurrence of indefinite subject null pronouns in finite clauses. This at least shows that indefinite null subjects are not at all widespread in the languages predominantly examined by theoretical linguists. But why did such null elements come into existence in Mauritian Creole? Did early Mauritian Creole fulfil some preconditions for this special development? The answer is probably yes.

Due to the fact that early Mauritian Creole as an autonomous and extremely young language did not yet have the opportunity to greatly expand its lexicon, it still lacked unambiguous overt expressions for indefinite specific and indefinite generic subject pronouns. In case indefinite specific or generic subjects are overt, the ambiguous lexical expressions *en dimun* or *zot*, respectively (cf. Baker 1972), appear up to this day. Both of them have more than one interpretation. In potentially every syntactic environment *en dimun* can be understood as the

specific indefinite pronoun *someone* or simply as *one man* and *zot* as the generic pronoun *one* or simply as the definite 3PL pronoun *they*.

Thanks to the introduction of indefinite null elements, this ambiguity could have been partly abolished in modern colloquial Mauritian Creole. That is because, in contrast to the overt expressions *en dimin* and *zot*, the new indefinite null pronouns are never ambiguous. They get either an unambiguously specific interpretation or an unambiguously generic interpretation in their appropriate syntactic surroundings. Specific indefinite null pronouns only appear in subject positions where due to the absence of any preceding antecedent-DP every definite interpretation is excluded and, moreover, due to the presence of overt TMA specifications every generic interpretation is blocked. Generic indefinite null pronouns, on the other hand, only appear in subject positions where due to the absence of any TMA markers every specific as well as every definite interpretation is excluded. In this way, the indefinite null subjects are restricted to only one individual reading. They are strictly monofunctional. Accordingly, the introduction of indefinite null pronouns has enriched the pronoun system of Mauritian Creole by adding unambiguous – even though phonetically empty – expressions for specific and generic indefinite pronouns.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF NULL ARGUMENTS IN CAPE VERDEAN CREOLE

3.1. Weak pronouns and their grammaticalization to subject agreement markers

Baptista (2002) observes that modern Cape Verdean Creole exhibits clitic and non-clitic pronouns. Whereas the non-clitic forms represent definite strong pronouns, the clitic forms stand for definite weak pronouns. There is no case distinction within the paradigm of the non-clitic pronouns. Consequently, the strong subject pronouns are at first glance homonymous with the corresponding strong object pronouns (cf. Table 3).

Table 3

Homonymy between clitic and non-clitic pronouns in Cape Verdean Creole

	Subject pronouns		Object pronouns	
	clitic	non-clitic	clitic	non-clitic
1.SG.	<i>N / M</i>	<i>mi / ami</i>	<i>-m</i>	<i>mi / ami</i>
2.SG.	<i>bu</i>	<i>bo / abo</i>	<i>-bu</i>	<i>bo / abo</i>
3.SG.	<i>e</i>	<i>el / ael</i>	<i>-(e)l</i>	<i>el / ael</i>
1.PL.	<i>nu</i>	<i>nos / anos</i>	<i>-nu</i>	<i>nos / anos</i>
2.PL.	<i>nhos</i>	<i>nhos / anhos</i>	<i>-nhos</i>	<i>nhos / anhos</i>
3.PL.	<i>es</i>	<i>es / aes</i>	<i>-(e)s</i>	<i>es / aes</i>

However, the distribution of the pronominal subject elements in present-day Cape Verdean Creole finite clauses indicates that the Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system is currently taking a new shape. As pointed out by Baptista (2002), pronoun doubling is nowadays required for realizing stressed 1SG,PL subject pronouns in finite clauses (3a-b). It is strongly preferred in case the subject is represented by a strong 2SG,PL pronoun (3c). Moreover, it is always permitted if a stressed 3SG,PL pronominal subject argument is inserted (3d). This gives rise to the justifiable supposition that the weak 1st, 2nd and 3rd person overt subject pronouns, which are left-adjacent to the main verb, are turning one by one into verbal markers. The reasonable hypothesis that especially the 1st person clitic pronoun is in a very advanced state of this change is confirmed by its behaviour in conjoined clauses. Although resumed pronominal subjects are normally omitted in successor conjuncts, the 1st person subject clitics of Cape Verdean Creole obligatorily precede their finite verbs regardless of their occurrence in the first or any subsequent conjunct (3e).

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (3) (a) *Mi'N pega na kel livru li*
I 1SG catch in SG book here
 'I_(str.) studied this book here.'
- (b) **Ami pega na kel livru li*
I catch in SG book here
- (c) *Bo ?(bu) sabê es koza drete*
you 2SG know SG thing well
 'You know this thing well.'
- (d) *El (e) fika ku povu la*
he 3SG stay with people there
 'He stayed there with the people.'
- (e) *N ben i nada *(N) ka ubi mas*
1SG come and nothing **1SG** SG hear anymore
 'I came and did not hear anything anymore.'

Thus, the clitic pronouns of Cape Verdean Creole are grammaticalizing to functional subject agreement morphemes thereby losing pronominal features and leaving behind null arguments – albeit to different degrees. For that reason, all 1st person (4a), most 2nd person (4b) and many 3rd person weak pronominal subject arguments of finite clauses in today's Cape Verdean Creole are represented by null subjects in combination with the corresponding functional subject agreement markers.

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (4) (a) **pro nu** *ten un anu na prizão*
1PL have one year in jail
 ‘We spent one year in jail.’
- (b) **pro bu** *trabadjá ku nha povus*
2SG work with my people
 ‘You worked with my people.’

Astonishingly, the non-pronominal subject DPs of Cape Verdean Creole are always in a strictly complementary distribution with those functional morphemes (5a-b).

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (5) (a) **João** *fika ku povu la*
João stay with people here
 ‘João stayed there with the people.’
- (b) ***João** *e fika ku povu la*
João **3SG** stay with people here

This is ascribable to the fact that the clitic subject pronouns of Cape Verdean Creole have entered the grammaticalization path to functional agreement morphemes and therefore have gained essential properties of verbal markers while maintaining some pronominal features. As a consequence, neither the resulting subject null forms nor the corresponding overt stressed pronominal subjects are able to refer freely. Both of them rely on their being locally bound by a clause-mate antecedent, instead. As shown in (6), their traces located in SpecV are A-bound by the adjacent quasi-pronominal morphology of the finite verb. Accordingly, the *phi*-feature content of the Cape Verdean Creole subject null arguments is reconstructed by anaphor binding.

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (6) (a) **Ami_i/pro_i** *N_i sta t_i ubi vos*
I **1SG(PRON)** PROG hear voice
 ‘I_(str.) / I hear voices.’
- (b) **Bo_i/pro_i** *bu_i ta t_i pode lenbra*
you **2SG(PRON)** COND can remember
 ‘YOU / you could remember.’

But, why do the clitic subject pronouns of Cape Verdean Creole retain pronominal properties on their grammaticalization path to functional agreement markers? The diachronic works on many other languages make clear that such a development is not at all the rule. Weak pronouns are normally immediately reanalysed as exclusively verbal categories (cf. Siewierska 1999). However, the closer

inspection of the Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system reveals that the extraordinary change of the clitic subject pronouns in Cape Verdean Creole is well motivated as it causes an essential morphological differentiation. That is because the development of quasi-pronominal agreement markers not only results in the rise of null arguments but has also the welcome side effect that the homonymy between the non-clitic subject and the non-clitic object pronouns is eliminated. Due to their obligatory combination with the quasi-pronominal agreement markers of the finite verb, the non-clitic subject pronouns henceforth differ from the strong object pronouns in their morphological representation (cf. Table 4). As a consequence the Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system becomes more specialized and therefore undergoes a relevant improvement.

Non-Creole languages that likewise originally lack any case distinction in their pronominal system exhibit similar properties. This can be observed in the Celtic languages, for example in Welsh where the incorporated pronominal subjects of the so-called synthetic verb forms underwent grammaticalization to quasi-pronominal subject agreement markers and thereby induced a morphological dissociation between the non-incorporated subject and object pronouns. For that reason the synthetic verb forms of Welsh are, just like the functional subject agreement markers of the Cape Verdean Creole verbs, still in complementary distribution with non-pronominal subject DPs (cf. Fuß & Wratil forthc.).

3.2. *The features of the copula 'e'*

The Cape Verdean Creole copula *e*, which heads individual-level predicates, is the only finite verb element that does not co-occur with any subject clitics (Baptista 2002). In other words, *e* is strictly incompatible with quasi-pronominal subject agreement markers. This is shown in (7) where, in contrast to (7a), the ungrammatical example (7b) contains a functional subject agreement morpheme immediately preceding the copula verb *e*. Interestingly, *e* is additionally the only finite verb element that always and exclusively allows 3SG subject pronouns to get a complete null realization (Baptista 2002) (7c-d).

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (7) (a) *Abo e nha pai*
you COP my father
 'You are my father.'
- (b) ***pro** *bu e hna pai*
 2SG(PRON) COP my father
- (c) *El e nha pai*
he COP my father
 'He is my father.'
- (d) **pro** *e nha pai*
he COP my father
 'He is my father.' (*You are my father)

As pointed out by Ichinose (1993), the copula *e* has evolved from the weak 3SG subject pronoun *e*. Considering the peculiar behaviour of *e* in present-day Cape Verdean Creole, it has to be inferred that the pronoun *e* has gained verbal properties but retained pronominal features on its grammaticalization path to a copula verb. This accounts for the fact that *e* as ‘quasi-subject’ clashes with additional subject elements that display verbal features, hence, with quasi-pronominal subject agreement markers. Because of its residual pronominal properties it is moreover always capable of identifying its diachronic precursor, thus, the 3SG subject pronoun.

3.3. *The occurrence of discourse oriented null pronouns*

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole furthermore exhibits discourse oriented null subjects. Such null arguments can be inserted in the absence of any functional subject agreement markers if their referent is the discourse topic and has been introduced in the preceding context in form of a referential DP (8a) or an appropriate functional subject agreement marker (8b). Their *phi*-feature content is recovered by their coindexation with the preceding DP that refers to the prominent topic or by coindexation with the preceding quasi-pronominal agreement morpheme that binds the null subject referring to the prominent topic.

Present-day Cape Verdean Creole

- (8) (a) *Nho Lion ka faze almusu; dja pro ba faze pastoria*
Mr. Lion NEG make lunch PERF go make field
 ‘Mr. Lion did not make lunch, he had gone to the fields.’

- (b) *pro N tene oitente sinku anu.*
1SG(PRON) have eighty five year
 ‘I am eighty five years old...’

- (c) *pro nase me mil novesenti kinzi*
 born self 1915
 ...I was born in 1915.’

Hence, just like Mauritian Creole, Cape Verdean Creole allows pronominal subjects that refer to thematic participants to be dropped from finite clauses. However, although the referents of 1st and 2nd person pronouns are generally much more topic-worthy than the 3rd person pronouns, the overwhelming majority of discourse oriented null subjects are 3SG null pronouns. This can be attributed to the occurrence of identifying subject agreement markers in most Cape Verdean Creole finite clauses that harbour a SAP subject. In case there is no quasi-pronominal subject agreement marker, a null argument is tentatively considered to be maximally underspecified. It therefore preferably adopts the least marked specification for a definite pronoun illustrated in (9).

(9) [D +pronominal, +definite, -PSE, -PL, ±MASC, -deictic, -stress]

Nevertheless, especially the introduction of the discourse oriented SAP null subjects contributes to an additional specialization of the Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system. This is because the 1st and 2nd person quasi-pronominal subject agreement markers have the same phonological representation as the 1st and 2nd person object clitics. In case they are omitted in favour of a complete null realization of the corresponding pronominal subject, they cause an obvious differentiation within the paradigm of the weak pronouns (cf. Table 4).

Table 4

Subject pronouns and object pronouns in present-day Cape Verdean Creole³

	subject pronouns		object pronouns	
	weak	strong	weak	strong
1.SG. (pro)	pro_i [-N _i / -M _i] <i>pro</i>	mi_i / ami_i [-N _i / -M _i]	-m	mi / ami
2.SG. (pro)	pro_i [-bu _j] <i>bu</i> <i>pro</i>	bo_i / abo_i [-bu _j] <i>bo</i> / <i>abo</i>	-bu	bo / abo
3.SG.	e <i>pro_i</i> [-e _j] <i>pro</i>	el / ael <i>el_i</i> / <i>ael_i</i> [-e _j]	-(e)l	el / ael
1.PL. (pro)	pro_i [-nu _j] <i>pro</i>	nos_i / anos_i [-nu _j]	-nu	nos / anos
2.PL. (pro)	pro_i [-nhos _j] <i>nhos</i> <i>pro</i>	nhos_i / anhos_i [-nhos _j] <i>nhos</i> / <i>anhos</i>	-nhos	nhos / anhos
3.PL. (pro)	es <i>pro_i</i> [-es _j] <i>pro</i>	es / aes <i>es_i</i> / <i>aes_i</i> [-es _j]	-(e)s	es / aes

³ Identification of **pro** is through A-binding by the quasi-pronominal agreement marker of the finite verb **and** identification of **pro** by its association with the prominent discourse topic.

3.4. *The pronoun system of present-day Cape Verdean Creole*

The Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system is in transition. Due to the fact that morphosyntactic change does not affect all forms of a single paradigm in the same way and with the same intensity, the Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system is host to two different kinds of null pronouns and, moreover, displays a lot of forms that have various representations. As mentioned in 3.1., the development of the subject clitics in Cape Verdean Creole has not only enabled referential subjects to bear at least a partial null realization. Thanks to the elimination of homonymous forms, it has also yielded a morphological specialization within the paradigm of the strong pronouns. Furthermore, as illustrated in 3.2., the introduction of discourse oriented null pronouns has given weak SAP subject pronouns the opportunity to morphologically differentiate themselves from the corresponding weak object pronouns. The present-day Cape Verdean Creole pronoun system therefore combines the following pronominal forms (cf. Table 4).⁴

4. CONCLUSION

Various types of referential null subjects have been introduced into the Creole languages I discussed in this article. The null arguments concerned show differences in their definiteness, their recovery, their grammatical allocation within the binding theory and their syntactic preference to overt pronouns. Since all of them have eliminated homonymies or prevented ambiguity, they have contributed to an enrichment and morphological specialization of the corresponding pronoun systems.

As illustrated in 2.1., the extensive homonymy between the weak and the strong subject pronouns in Mauritian Creole and presumably in other Creole languages of the Indian Ocean was abolished by the implementation of pronominal discourse oriented null subjects. Moreover, thanks to the introduction of indefinite null pronouns, competing interpretations of Mauritian Creole clauses containing an indefinite subject have become avoidable. Also in the Atlantic Creole languages as for instance in Cape Verdean Creole, the homonymy between various pronominal items has been eliminated or is still vanishing. The considerations in 3.1. show that Cape Verdean Creole is losing the homonymy between its strong subject and strong object pronouns owing to the development of quasi-pronominal agreement markers and the concomitant emergence of anaphoric null subjects. In addition, the implementation of pronominal discourse oriented null subjects has offered the opportunity to resolve the homonymy between the weak SAP subject and the weak SAP object pronouns in Cape Verdean Creole. It has to be concluded that homonymy flight has a considerable influence on the development and prevalence of null arguments in languages whose pronoun system originally lacks morphological strong-weak or case distinctions.

⁴Note that the most common representations of the separate forms are printed in bold font.

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